

ONE OF THOSE THINGS

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ONE OF THOSE THINGS

A NOVEL

by

 PETER CHEYNEY



COLLINS

14 ST. JAMES'S PLACE LONDON

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CHAPTER ONE

MÈRYS

I

WHEN THE starting bell sounded O'Day came through the narrow passage-way that leads from the Tote and the back of the paddock into the enclosure. He stood looking across the race course watching the horses as they went over the first jump. He thought a jumping meeting was one of those things. You either liked it or you didn't. He thought he had an open mind on the subject which meant, really, that he was bored.

The people in the enclosure moved forward to the rails. Now the horses were rounding the bend and coming into the straight. As they went past the post O'Day saw that his own was last but one. Now he was certain he was bored. He shrugged his shoulders. So that was that!

He began to think about Vanner. One of these days, thought O'Day ; one of these fine days, he would have to do something about Vanner. But he wasn't quite certain what. One thing was definite and that was that things couldn't go on as they were. It wasn't good for anybody.

O'Day was tall and slim. He had good shoulders. His lackadaisical style and lazy walk concealed a hard, sinewy physique.

His face, from the cheek-bones, which were high,

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was almost triangular. The jaw looked as if it had originally decided to come to a point ; then changed its mind and suddenly squared itself off. His eyes were very blue, very steady. He seldom blinked. His hair was dark, cut close at the sides. It had a not unattractive wave. He was well-dressed. His brown shoes were well-cut and polished with care, his tweed over-check suit well-pressed. He wore no overcoat in spite of the fact that it was cold and that most of the women in the enclosure huddled in their fur coats.

He threw the cigarette away ; moved towards the refreshment room at the back of the enclosure, where he ordered coffee. In finding the sixpence to pay for it his fingers encountered the four one pound notes in his pocket. He thought that wasn't so good ; that it was time he went back to London.

He moved over to the coal fire ; stood looking into it, sipping coffee. His mind was still concerned with Vanner. He thought that maybe he was between the devil and the deep sea—the deep sea being Vanner and the devil being something else that was more formidable because it was uncertain.

Somebody said :

"Hello, O'Day. How's it going?"

O'Day put his coffee cup on the mantelpiece over the fire. He turned slowly.

"Hello, Jennings. It could be worse." O'Day smiled. When he smiled his face became almost illuminated. The mouth moved very little but the eyes shone. He went on : "I've backed five horses in five races and each one of them has been in the last two. That must mean I'm lucky in love."

"You're telling me!" said Jennings cynically.

"Maybe you'll get around to doing something about that one of these fine days."

"Meaning what?" asked O'Day.

Jennings shrugged his shoulders. "You know I haven't been working as an Insurance Company's assessor for ten years without finding out something about people. There are two sorts of people—two sorts of men I mean. Men that women go for and men that women don't go for."

O'Day moved a little. He took out a thin, silver case; lighted a cigarette.

"Meaning what?" he said again.

The other shrugged his shoulders. "The ones that women go for get affected by it or they don't. I've never known which class to put you in."

O'Day said easily: "Why worry about it? I hope it doesn't keep you awake at night."

Jennings grinned. He was a small man, with an over-developed paunch; grey, twinkling eyes. Just now he looked almost benevolent.

"Nothing keeps me awake at night," he said, "except maybe once or twice in the small hours of the morning, when I've been getting over a hangover, or thinking about going out and acquiring one. All the same I've been wondering about you."

O'Day said: "Look, you're killing me with curiosity. What's all this in aid of?"

"I'll tell you," said the other man. "You're getting most of your work from my firm, the International & General Insurance Company. Right?"

O'Day nodded.

Jennings said: "Insurance Companies are getting to be very particular about their investigators, O'Day!"

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"I can hardly wait." There was a touch of a South Irish accent in O'Day's voice. Its timbre was almost caressing.

"I'm glad you're curious," said Jennings. He looked vaguely uncomfortable. He half-turned and looked round the big room as if he hoped to see someone. Someone who might possibly interrupt the conversation and save him some trouble. He turned back towards O'Day ; stood, his hands in his overcoat pockets, hesitating.

O'Day smiled. He said casually : "Why don't you get it off your chest, Jennings?"

Jennings shrugged his shoulders. He said : "You did me a good turn once, O'Day. Remember? Now I'm trying to do you one. Perhaps you'll tell me to mind my own damned business or you might even take some sort of notice of what I say—that is if you ever take any notice of what anyone says, you Irish so-and-so. I've never thought you to be a damned fool. I don't believe that you're one now."

"All right," said O'Day. His tone was cheerful. "Let's take it that at the moment I'm not a damned fool. What's it all about?"

"There's been a helluva lot of talk about you and Vanner in the office," said Jennings. "I don't know if you know where your partner's heading, but if you don't I'm telling you that he's doing both of you a bit of no good. He's cockeyed five days in the week. He doesn't do any work. My own boss at the office told me the other day that your firm is weeks behind on the last four cases we handed to you for investigation. Yesterday one of our Directors was talking about finding another agency. And we're a damned good company,

O'Day. If International & General throw you over, what are the other people going to say? All this is going on, and you're down here at Plumpton, backing losers and, apparently, liking it."

O'Day said: "I like the air. They tell me it's very good for the lungs."

"What the hell's the matter with *your* lungs?" Jennings' tone was petulant.

"Nothing," said O'Day cheerfully. "Nothing at all. I was thinking of other people. People whose lungs aren't so good."

"For the love of Mike," said Jennings almost angrily. "Don't you ever take anything seriously? I suppose you know what they're saying?"

O'Day shrugged his shoulders. "Whatever they're saying I don't have to go into a song and dance about it. Anyway what is it that they *are* saying?"

Jennings dropped his voice. "Don't be a bloody fool all your life, O'Day," he said seriously. "Everybody in the office has the idea that you've worked that Irish charm of yours on Vanner's wife and upset his family apple-cart. The idea is that that's the reason for his being on a continuous jag. He's stuck on that baby, you know. He thinks she's marvellous; the best thing that ever came into his life. And even if she isn't, he's entitled to his little pipe dream. It's not so clever of you, is it? Why the hell do you have to do that and bust up a damned good business like you and Vanner used to have? I don't believe you give a damn about the girl. I don't believe you give a damn about *any* girl. Maybe you're just amusing yourself, but if you've got any sense you're not going to bust up the O'Day & Vanner Agency over it."

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O'Day drew on his cigarette. "I suppose it hasn't occurred to you—or them—that these rumours could be wrong?"

"Don't be a damned fool," said Jennings. "I *know* they're not wrong. I know how this thing started and it's time you knew. Vanner's walked out on his wife Merys and told Stark of the Inter-Ocean that it was through you. He was talking to Stark about getting a divorce. He told Stark that four weeks ago, when you were supposed to be in Scotland on the Yardley case, you spent a long week-end with Merys Vanner at The Sable Inn—some dump near Totnes in Devonshire."

O'Day grinned. "Just fancy that! Who told him?"

"She did," said Jennings. "*She* told him. He's going to believe *her*, isn't he? So's everyone else." He began to put on his gloves. "Well. . . . I've told you. Now you know."

"Thanks, pal," said O'Day. He grinned at Jennings. "Tell me something. Where's Vanner, and where's Merys Vanner?"

Jennings shrugged his shoulders. "You can search me as to where Vanner is. I wish I knew. I've been told to try and find him—or you. Merys told that girl in your office that she was going to Eastbourne—or somewhere round that part of the world."

O'Day said: "You're a nice guy, Jennings. You're full of good intentions. Have you had any luck down here to-day?"

"Nope," said the other. "Not a bit. But why should I? I've come to the conclusion I must be lucky in love. I hope so anyway. So I don't mind

losing sometimes provided it doesn't hurt too much. It's a funny thing," he went on, "if I get into a poker game I lose ; if I pick a horse it goes down. I came down here to back one in the last race. I came down here just to back that one horse. It's an outsider. I've had a bet in the other five races this afternoon and gone down each time." He laughed. "And now the last race is here and I'm not even going to have a bet on the tip I got."

O'Day said : "That's how it goes, Jimmy. But you've still got the love angle." He laughed. "You should worry if the horses don't go for you."

"I got this tip—Gelert—from Travis, one of our Directors," said Jennings gloomily. "It belongs to him. Red with a white cross bar. He said it'll doddle it at twenty to one." He sighed. "I never did like owners' tips."

O'Day said : "So you're not going to back it ?"

Jimmy shook his head. "No. I've had it. So long, O'Day. And for the love of Mike watch your step."

He grinned uncomfortably ; went away.

After a while O'Day came out of the refreshment room and stood on the green mound where people congregated to watch the progress of the races.

He looked over at the number board on the other side of the race course. Then he walked slowly through the narrow passage-way by the Tote. He went to the pound booking office and bought four one-pound tickets on Gelert. Then he went back to the refreshment room ; bought another cup of coffee ; carried it over to the fireplace ; stood there, looking straight in front of him with vague eyes.

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He thought he would have to do something about Vanner. Jennings was right. Insurance Companies, and especially big Companies like the International & General, did not like to hear peculiar rumours about the investigators who handled their business. He wondered how this stuff about Merys Vanner and himself had got about. Vanner, he thought, was a damned fool anyway. Why didn't he come and talk to him, O'Day, instead of drinking himself silly? Unless . . . O'Day considered the alternative. He considered the 'unless.' He wondered if *that* guess might be right.

Vaguely he heard the starting bell. He did not bother to go outside. He stood there thinking about the implications of what Jennings had said. A minute later people began to walk out of the refreshment room towards the enclosure. Soon he was alone. He put the untasted cup of coffee on the mantelpiece; went out of the refreshment room. As he walked towards the rails he saw the red racing jacket with the white cross bars go past the judge's stand. So that was that!

He remembered what Jennings had said about unlucky in cards, lucky in love. He wondered what the hell that meant to him anyway.

A voice behind him—Jennings voice—said: "So I had to back five losers and let this one go. The bookies are paying twenty-five to one. Goodness knows what the Tote will pay. I should think a hundred. So I get the tip from the owner and I don't make it."

"That's too bad, pal," O'Day said. "Well, so long. I've got to go and get some money."

"You heel . . . !" Jennings voice was acid. "So you backed my tip."

O'Day nodded. "That's right. But don't worry. You said you were lucky in love."

Jennings asked : "What did you have on it ?"

"Four pounds," said O'Day. "And maybe I'm going to win a hundred for it. I'd like that. It pays better than being a detective or an amateur Casanova."

Jennings said : "If you came down by car you can drive me back to town."

"No," said O'Day. "I'm not going back to London."

Jennings raised his eyebrows. "Where the hell are you going ?"

O'Day grinned. "I wouldn't know. Maybe I'll think up some place. So long."

O'Day lay on the bed in his first floor bedroom at the Splendide at Eastbourne. When the waiter came in with the Martini, he was looking at the ceiling, blowing smoke rings, watching them. The waiter thought they were very nice smoke rings. He wished he too could blow smoke rings like that.

O'Day sat up on the bed ; took the Martini ; tipped the waiter ; began to sip the drink. He thought life was damned funny. He thought that women were damned funny, which was one of the odd things about life. He thought that when you imagined you were thinking about life most of the time you found yourself thinking about women. He grinned to himself.

He got up ; began to walk about the bedroom, the

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Martini in his hand. He walked about for quite a time, smoking and thinking. He wondered exactly what Merys Vanner was doing. She had something on her mind. He smiled at the thought. And when a woman like Merys got something on her mind she made something happen. Something *had* to happen because she had a restless, impatient mind that could bear neither inactivity nor frustration. She had to do something about everything that perturbed her. She had lost the ability to relax. That, combined with her lovely figure, sense of dress, immense allure and not a great deal of breeding, spelt danger for anybody who got in her way.

O'Day began to unpack his suitcase. He thought it was an odd idea that he should have put a suitcase in the back of the car when he went to Plumpton races. Just another habit—the sort of habit he'd developed through life of always being prepared for the odd things to turn up. He remembered the number of times he'd gone to some place intending to return to London that day, and a few hours later had found himself somewhere entirely different, where he had been glad of the suitcase.

He undressed ; took a hot and cold shower ; shaved. He put on a double-breasted dinner jacket with a soft silk shirt and a watered silk tie. On his way down the stairs he looked at his watch. It was seven-thirty. He stood at the bottom of the stairs looking at the people who were sitting about the lounge. Nice, quiet people, O'Day thought. Business men and their wives—people who wanted to spend a quiet week-end to escape from the cares and worries of work, queues, rations, general depression and frustration.

Leaning against the door of his office, his burly figure relaxed and easy, a smile on his face, was Parker, the hall-porter, looking with a benevolent eye on the guests around him. O'Day went across to the reception on the right of the lounge. He smiled at the girl behind the counter; began idly to turn over the pages of the register. Then he came back to the current page. Eight or nine spaces before the one in which his own name was written he saw it—"Mrs. Merys Vanner, London." And the number of the room '134.' That would be on the second floor, he thought.

He walked slowly across the lounge towards the hall porter. He asked: "Parker, when did Mrs. Vanner arrive?"

"This afternoon, Mr. O'Day," said Parker. "About four o'clock."

O'Day nodded. He turned; walked across the lounge, through the swing doors, into the American bar. There were only half a dozen people in it, sitting up against the bar, drinking cocktails.

She was in the far corner. She was reading *The Evening News*, and apparently she was interested in nobody. O'Day grinned. That was her line—that she was never interested in anybody. What she wanted was for them to be interested in her—especially if they were good looking or presentable men. And after she'd concluded that they *were* interested in her, she either developed interest or she didn't, according to the way she felt. Merys, he thought, was definitely something.

She looked superb. She was wearing a black dinner frock of tulle over a slim-fitting, heavy satin foundation.

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The satin caressed her figure ; showed it off to the best advantage. And the tulle softened the lines. There were black sequin stars scattered over the tulle. She wore gun-metal nylons and American sandals with four-inch heels sprinkled with little jewels.

Her ash-blonde hair was cut in the latest chrysanthemum fashion. Her flame-red mouth threw into prominence her pale, almost transparent, camelia-coloured skin. O'Day sighed a little. He thought that when they christened Merys they might have given her a middle name—dynamite !

He looked sideways across the bar at her mascaraed eyes. They were fixed on the paper but, he thought, she had a wide vision to her amber-coloured eyes. He thought she had seen him, but she didn't propose to do anything about it—anyway not yet.

He sat on a high stool ; ordered a Martini. He watched her in the mirror behind the bar. She seemed interested in nothing but the newspaper. O'Day put his elbows on the bar and relaxed. He began to think about all sorts of things—about the business—if you could call it a business the way things were going ; about Vanner ; about the International & General, who were becoming a little perturbed because their investigators weren't doing so well and did not seem to be behaving themselves. But underneath all this, the background idea was a question—the question being exactly what Merys was playing at.

O'Day finished the Martini. He heard the rustle of the newspaper as she put it down. In the mirror he could see her slip her mink coat about her shoulders ; begin to walk across the bar towards the passage-way that led to the dining-room.

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As she passed behind him, he said: "Hello, Merys . . . I suppose you haven't seen me?" He smiled at her.

She stopped. Her eyes opened wide in a mild surprise. "Well, Terry . . . fancy seeing you here! Isn't the world a small place?"

"Sometimes it's a little too small for me," said O'Day. "I want to talk to you."

"Of course. . . ." She slipped gracefully on to the empty stool by his side.

He thought that everything she did, every gesture, every movement, was worked out very carefully.

She asked: "Did you know I was here or did you come, like I did, by accident—on impulse?"

He smiled cheerfully. "You came here on impulse? Like hell you did! You came here about as much on impulse as I did."

She said: "Dear . . . dear . . . dear . . . ! Doesn't this sound dramatic, Terry? So you didn't come here on impulse." She smiled, showing her white, even and pretty teeth. He noticed the real pearl necklace that Vanner had given her when they were married, and the beautifully-made, imitation diamond bracelet showing beneath the long sleeve of her gown.

He shook his head. "No . . . I came here because, in spite of the fact that you came here on impulse, Jennings of the International & General seemed to have an idea that you'd be down here. I met him at Plumpton race course. So I thought I'd come over and see what the form was."

She nodded. "I see. How nice for me, Terry. Are you going to buy me a little drink?"

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He said : " I'll buy you a big one. Let's have two large and very dry Martinis and go and sit in the corner and talk."

She smiled again—a slow, almost affectionate smile. He knew it very well.

" I'd like that, Terry. I don't think there could be anything nicer in the world than sitting in the corner of an attractive bar like this talking to you."

" That's fine," he said. " You're going to have a good time."

When the Martinis were served, he carried them to the table in the far corner of the bar. Most of the people had disappeared.

They sat down. There was silence for a little while, then :

" What's it all about ? " she asked. " There's something in the air, isn't there ? " Her voice was caressing. " Almost something dramatic, don't you think ? I like that."

" The trouble with you, Merys, is that you like dramatics too much. Or perhaps I should say that your sense of the theatre is over-developed."

She said quietly : " You mean that I ought to have been an actress ? "

He grinned at her. " You'd have made a damned good one. But you'd have been an awful headache to the firm you were working for."

There was another silence. O'Day was turning over his opening gambits. He thought, if you tried to play Merys you had to play her carefully ; otherwise there'd be a come-back—a worse come-back than the one he was dealing with.

He said : " Look, I've known Jennings for a long

time. He and I have always talked pretty straightly to each other. When I met him at Plumpton to-day he talked plenty. He was almost disturbing."

She grimaced. "You don't mean to say that anything that Mr. Jennings of the International & General could have to say would disturb you, Terry? And I love hearing you talk. I love that very mild suggestion of a soft, south-west Irish accent you have. It thrills me."

O'Day said: "Fine. Now my day's made." He went on: "Jennings was a little worried about the International & General's Investigators — Messrs. O'Day & Vanner."

"No? Do tell me why. Don't tell me that my bread and butter's going to disappear." She looked at him archly. "Or have you and Ralph fallen out again, Terry?" Her eyes were laughing.

He said: "You should know. Jennings said that Ralph, whom I haven't seen for a week, has been on a five day jag; he said they've had no reports on the last four cases Ralph has been handling for them."

"This is serious, isn't it, Terry?" Her eyes were still amused. "I wonder what made Ralph go on a jag."

He said: "You wouldn't know, of course. I suppose you haven't seen him?"

She shook her head. "Not for the last—" she thought for a moment—"six days."

"That means," said O'Day, "that when you did see him you started something. You sent him on a jag. Why?"

She shrugged her shoulders. She said demurely:

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"You wouldn't be tough with me, Terry, would you?"

He smiled at her. "Wouldn't I? If I had to be I would, Merys. You know that."

She clasped her hands. "That's what's so delightful about you, Terry. Underneath you can be as tough as hell, can't you? You *have* been as tough as hell. And you don't like it when other people get tough."

O'Day drew on his cigarette. "Meaning you?" he queried.

She nodded. "Meaning me. What do I have to do? Do I sit with my fingers crossed, with my hands folded, and take everything that comes to me? Is that the idea?"

O'Day drank some of the Martini. He said: "I want to know what you told Ralph six days ago. I want to know what it was you said to him that sent him out on this rip-snorter. You know what he's like when he gets drunk. He's impossible. He's not so good-tempered when he's sober, but when he's drunk he's nobody's business. Look, O'Day Investigations were pretty good before Ralph ever joined them. They are still going to be good in spite of the bad luck we've been having for the last six or eight months due to something I'm beginning to put my finger on."

She asked again: "Meaning me?"

"Meaning you," said O'Day. "Why don't we cut out the frills and talk sense, Merys?"

She sipped a little Martini; smoothed out a fold in her tulle over-skirt.

She said: "So I'm to be good and tell you everything that happened. I'm responsible for all the

trouble that's been happening in the O'Day-Vanner organisation for the last six months, and I'm supposed to be responsible for Ralph going off on this rip-snorter. You're perfectly right, Terry. And how do you like that?"

"I don't like it. And it's got to stop."

She looked at him sideways. Her eyes were narrowed. There was a proud gleam in them. "Has it? Oh, has it really? Clever Mr. O'Day. I wonder how you're going to stop it."

O'Day laughed at her. When she was angry she always got much more angry if you laughed at her, and when she got angry enough she occasionally told the truth.

He said: "You know, Merys, you're a very good-looking, attractive woman. You think you're clever. Sometimes I think you're a nit-wit. Sometimes I think you haven't enough brains to back a car into the garage on a wet day. Sometimes you make me so bored I could sleep."

"I see. . . ." Her voice was very low and vibrant. He could see her little white teeth were on edge. "All right," she went on. "Well, you want it, Mr. O'Day, so I'll give it to you. I don't like being treated with contempt—the way you've always treated me. When I fall in love with a man it means something. So I was stupid enough to fall in love with you."

O'Day said: "Married women have no right to fall in love with their husband's partner. It's silly. That's the sort of thing you do. Besides, there were the other two or three individuals you spent your time falling in and out of love with. Why couldn't you make use of one of them?"

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"Because I damned well didn't want to. When I tell a man I'm for him it's a compliment. That's what I think. But you didn't. You told me where I could get off and you thought I was going to take it, didn't you?"

O'Day sighed. "If ever I thought such a thing, quite obviously I was very wrong."

"You don't know how wrong you were, you Irish heel. What did you think I was going to do—go and sit in the corner and twiddle my thumbs? You know how it's been between Ralph and myself for a long time. I don't like him. He's not my sort of husband. God knows why I married him."

O'Day yawned. "My guess is you married him for the pearl necklace, the diamond solitaire ring you're wearing next to the fake one on your second finger, and a block of War Defence Bonds that he had *then*. That's my guess."

Her voice was trembling with anger. "I see. . . . So that's what you think of me."

"Yes . . . don't you like it?" O'Day watched her clench the fingers of her right hand. He could see the scarlet nails pressing into her palm.

She said: "There are moments when I could kill you, Terry."

"I hope this isn't one of them. I hate dying on Saturday evenings. But go on with the story. So you decided to have your own back on Mr. O'Day?"

She nodded. "If you knew as much about women as you're supposed to know—you ought to realise that no woman like me is going to be turned down by a man like you without doing something about it."

"All right," said O'Day. "I'm bored with this preamble. Would you like another drink?"

"No, thank you." Her voice was incisive.

O'Day got up. He picked up his glass. "I would, so you'll have to keep the big dramatic story till I get back." He smiled at her over his shoulder.

He went to the bar; ordered a small Martini. He didn't want the drink; he wanted a few minutes in which to think. He wondered if by some means Merys could have planned this encounter; then decided that this wasn't possible even if she'd known Jennings was going to the Plumpton race meeting; that he might talk to him—O'Day. But she didn't know *he* was going there. He'd only decided that morning. So it wasn't prepared. He carried the drink back to the table, sat down.

He said:

"All right. What did you tell Ralph?"

She smiled. The smile was almost shimmering in its sweetness.

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She said: "Last Sunday I told him that I thought you weren't very pleased with the way things were going in the business. I told him that since you'd been away on this case you've been handling in France he hadn't been near the office, and that Miss Trundle—" she smiled at him—"your very efficient secretary—had been ringing up all day because nobody had answered the post for four or five days, and she didn't know what to do about anything.

"I told him that there was going to be a lot of trouble when you came back. I told him that you were fed up with him; that you thought it was time he was out of the firm. I said I believed that you'd

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take any excuse to get him out. So he asked me what I thought he'd ask me."

O'Day nodded. "He asked you why?"

"Yes." She smiled at him; put her fingers on his arm. "I told him that you were stuck on me and that I knew you were a fearful man for chasing women; that you couldn't even lay off your partner's wife. I said I'd had a very tough time fighting you off during the three weeks he was away in Northumberland. Remember?"

O'Day said: "Nice work. What a sweet bitch you are, Merys."

"You're telling me! Who was it said hell hath no fury like a woman scorned?"

"I don't remember," said O'Day. "And I don't care. But obviously the boy was right."

She went on: "You can imagine that Ralph didn't like this. He's always been jealous of you. What he didn't say he'd do to you was nobody's business." She put up her hand as he started to speak. "Oh, I know he couldn't do anything to you. I know Ralph's a rather cheap sort of wind-bag. I've known that for years. But underneath that he's some sort of man, I suppose. And, as you know, he's very fond of me."

O'Day said: "I know. I've often wondered why. Any man who's fond of you ought to have his brain examined."

"Maybe," she said. "But the situation's been created, Terry. It's not a bit of good you going to Ralph and telling him that I made a pass at you. Do you think he'd believe it? He's been off on a jag. He's done all sorts of things that aren't going to do the business any good."

O'Day nodded. "And you've got me more or less where you want me, is that it?" he asked.

"Why not? Quite obviously, there's going to be a lot of trouble in the firm of O'Day and Vanner."

There was another silence; then O'Day asked: "What do you think you're going to get out of this, Merys?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Ralph's going to do something about you. He's a bluffer, but he's got a nasty cunning streak in him. He'll find some way of getting back at you and of making you squirm. And that's what I want."

O'Day stopped himself asking her the question that was on the tip of his tongue. He asked himself instead: Supposing her scheme came off? Supposing the war between Ralph and himself came to a head? The partnership dissolved and the business ruined or half-ruined in the process? What was she going to get out of this? Vanner had no money except what he took out of the firm. He was a spend-thrift and Merys needed money. She had to have it. Had she got someone else lined up?

He finished his Martini; took out his cigarette case; lighted a cigarette. He did it very slowly. Then he got up.

"Let's go and eat dinner, Merys. It's a lovely evening and we can have a lot of fun watching the sea through the dining-room windows." He grinned at her. "I'd like watching the sea with you."

"You mean you'd like to throw me into it?"

O'Day shrugged. "If I threw you into the sea it'd probably be offended and give up its dead. Let's go and eat."

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As she moved past him he noticed that her lips were trembling with rage.

When the waiter brought the coffee the dance orchestra began to play. Through the curtains O'Day could see the moon shining on the sea. He thought the scene was very peaceful.

She smiled at him across the table. "It looks nice, doesn't it, Terry? It's a pity life isn't like that—all shiny and smooth."

He said: "It might not be so interesting."

She asked: "So you prefer it as it is?"

"What's the good of wanting something you can't get," said O'Day. "Trouble is a natural part of life. You can't duck it. It's what you do about it that matters."

"Well, Terry . . . what are you going to do about it? You're in a spot, aren't you?"

He raised his eyebrows. One eyebrow was slightly higher than the other. She thought this fascinated her; that most things about O'Day fascinated her.

He asked: "Would you like a liqueur?"

She said she would like some brandy. O'Day ordered the liqueurs and more coffee.

He said: "So I'm in a spot, am I? You tell me why."

"Well, you must be in a spot. Such a spot that I'm wondering if even you can dig your way out of it, Terry—even you. Ralph believes that you and I have been very very wicked together. Do you know—" she smiled at him demurely—"he even thinks that

we spent a week-end at a hotel in the country—I think he'll probably do something about that."

O'Day said: "You can't do anything about anything just because you *believe* something. If you mean that he might think of divorcing you, it's no good *believing* that we spent a week-end together at some hotel in the country. You've got to prove it."

She nodded. "You're perfectly right, Terry. But what is proof? It's a funny thing. You know, whenever I've read reports of divorce cases it seems to me that the Courts believe all sorts of things. But they are always inclined to believe the worst."

"Maybe," said O'Day. "But you've got to *prove* misconduct."

"Yes . . . I suppose so. But if a woman arrived at an hotel late; if the woman had made the reservation; if the solitary night porter, very sleepy, showed her up to her double room and the man arrived afterwards so that he wasn't seen; if she said the man was you, it's quite a chance that somebody would believe it. Unless you could prove an alibi, Terry."

He said: "Well, that would be pretty easy, wouldn't it, Merys? Threë weeks ago I was busily engaged—and certainly not with you."

"That is so, my dear," she said. "You were in the country on the Yardley case. And I know that you couldn't talk about it. It was very very confidential, wasn't it, Terry? Ralph told me. So it seems that I am prepared to state that you were with me, and you on the other hand aren't able to state where you were. It doesn't look so good for you, does it? In any event Ralph's got quite enough to issue a petition. That wouldn't do you or the firm any good."

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O'Day said: "I wonder what you're playing at. Are you just trying to get back on me or what?"

"Maybe I'm just trying to get back on you. You know what I think, Terry? I think the easiest thing would be for you to play it my way. After all, Ralph has always been something of a sick headache in the firm, hasn't he? Besides that, he bores me. I don't think there's anything worse than being bored by a man. Why don't you let him get his divorce? I think you'd be very much better on your own. You could start all over again. You and I could have quite an amusing time, Terry. I'm very fond of you, I think you're an attractive man."

O'Day grinned. "*Me*—and who else?" he asked. "I hate being in a queue, Merys. I don't like it and I'm not going to do it."

"Well, what *are* you going to do? If Ralph issues his petition you're either going to let the case go into the undefended list, which makes a lot of trouble for you, or you're going to defend it, which means a lot more trouble."

O'Day said: "It looks to me as if in any event there's going to be a lot of trouble."

She nodded her head prettily.

O'Day sighed. "I think it's all very interesting but slightly boring. Just as Ralph seems to bore you, I think you bore me, Merys. I don't like women who try to make love to me by force."

She shrugged her shoulders. "All right. Then you're still in the spot I mentioned, and you don't know what you're going to do. You're going to have a bad time working it out, Terry."

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He said : " You're quite wrong, my dear. I know exactly what I'm going to do." He got up. " I'm certainly not going to stay in this hotel with you, not even if we're living on separate floors. I think I'll go back and look at London." •

She smiled. " I'm 'sorry I've spoiled your weekend."

O'Day said : " You haven't. I only came down here because I wanted to talk to you. Now I've talked, I'll go. Good-night, Merys. I hope it keeps very, very fine for you."

She put her hands on the table. She looked at him from under half-closed lids.

" Damn you, Terry . . . ! Before I'm through with you you're going to pay—plenty."

" And like it, I suppose ? " said O'Day. " Good-night, sweetheart. I hope I won't be seeing you . . . well, not much."

When he had gone she sat there looking straight in front of her, drumming with long, slender fingers on the table.

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It was eleven-thirty when O'Day drove the car into the garage near Sloane Square. He handed it over to the man in charge ; told him to have the suitcase sent round. Then he walked in the direction of his rooms on the other side of the square.

It was a fine night. Inside the breast pocket of his dinner jacket O'Day could feel the bulge made by the wad of one hundred and thirty-one pound notes that he'd taken from the Tote on Gelert. He thought that

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was something. In any event it was better to be in a tough spot with a hundred and thirty pounds than without it.

He didn't like the situation. He began to think about Merys and Ralph Vanner. Merys was quite *something*, he thought. She knew what she wanted and she went straight out for it. It looked as if she wanted him. O'Day remembered all the incidents in the office—times when she'd come in to see Ralph, who by some chance was never there when she came.

From the beginning she'd tried a mild flirtation with O'Day, and afterwards, when the atmosphere had turned into something more serious, he'd decided it would be a good thing to tell Merys where she got off. He thought he might have known that women like Merys Vanner didn't get off; they stayed on the bus and made things not too amusing for everyone concerned.

And Ralph Vanner? O'Day thought he might easily be an unknown quantity. It was one thing to say he was weak, a bluffer, inefficient and a drunkard. But there was something more to Ralph than that. When he wasn't drinking he was quite a person and he had a vindictive streak in him. Also he was very much in love with his wife. Ralph was quite capable of causing all sorts of trouble without any assistance from Merys and, with the pair of them at work causing trouble, O'Day thought that things might be quite exciting in the near future.

He shrugged his shoulders. He thought: This is just one of those things. One of those things which happen to people and which you play off the cuff or

deal with as best you can. He remembered the song :
' Just One of Those Things. '

He let himself into his apartment block ; went up in the lift to the first floor. There was an envelope lying on the carpet in the hallway of his apartment—an envelope that had obviously been pushed under the door. It was addressed to him but he did not recognise the handwriting.

He lighted a cigarette ; mixed himself a whisky and soda. Then he tore open the envelope and read the letter.

There was no address at the top. It was dated that day and said :—

" Dear O'Day,

" I wonder if you remember me—Nicholas Needham ? I met you when you were on a job in America four years ago—one of those war-time things. Do you remember ?

" I've had two days in London. I've been here, in England, for a month trying to make up my mind about this thing and whether I'd come and see you about it. Now I've got to do something and fate, in the shape of a friend I met a few weeks ago and who talked to me about you and your work, gave me your address and generally acted as a boost for Mr. Terence O'Day, decreed that when I did arrive at your office, this morning, you should be away.

" Your secretary told me she didn't know where you were. She expected you back soon. Also she didn't know where your partner was. That didn't interest me because I wasn't interested in your partner, and didn't want to talk to him.

" The thing is this: I want you to do a job for me. Something that our mutual friend told me would be right up your street; something requiring your own particular sort

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of mentality. It's a rather peculiar commission to ask an investigator to undertake. It concerns a very charming woman with whom I was very much in love during the War years; to whom I proposed and who turned me down. A rather lovely person who lives in Sussex.

"She is very nice—rather lonely—and I think that unless she is helped very quickly there is a great deal of trouble before her one way or another. Unfortunately, because I have to leave for Africa to-day, I can't do anything about it. But you might be able to.

"I asked your secretary, Miss Trundle, what was the best way of getting into touch with you. She said she didn't think you'd be at your apartment but if I liked to leave a note for you in the office I could do so. So she gave me a pad and put me into the small waiting room next to your office, and I sat down and wrote the whole of the story—everything I thought, everything I knew and what I wanted you to do.

"When I'd done it I felt better. When you were working in America I found out enough about you to make me believe that you were the sort of person who wouldn't leave a job without doing his best to fix it one way or the other, and I hoped that you'd remember that I once did something for you.

"Anyway the whole story's there. I wrote it out at length; borrowed a stout manilla envelope from Miss Trundle. I put the story in the envelope with seven hundred and fifty pounds in five-pound bank notes. I should think your expenses might be half that sum. The rest is for you. She said she'd put it in the right-hand drawer of your desk. She said you'd probably get it within the next day or two.

"After that I felt better. But I also thought that in case you returned to your apartment first and went off some-

where without going to the office I'd leave this note for you. She gave me your address. Well, there it is, O'Day. I hope you'll do what I ask, I hope you'll be successful. Maybe we'll meet again one of these fine days if I get through with the job I'm on. If we do we'll have a drink together. If not, that's too bad. So long and good hunting.
"Nicholas Needham."

O'Day put the letter in his pocket ; drank some whisky and soda ; sat down in an armchair. It seemed that the financial aspect of life was improving. A hundred and thirty pounds and seven hundred and fifty was nearly nine hundred and, he thought, you could do a hell of a lot with nine hundred pounds.

He stubbed out his cigarette ; went into the bedroom ; took off his dinner jacket. He was untying his tie when an idea occurred to him. He re-tied his black bow ; put on his jacket ; switched off the lights ; went out of the flat. He walked back to the garage.

Five minutes later he drove towards his office in Long Acre. The street was dark and deserted. When he arrived he opened the outer door ; locked it behind him ; climbed up the long, old-fashioned flight of stairs to the first floor. At the end of the corridor through the half-glass door he could see the light in the office was on. O'Day wondered about that.

He walked down the passage, his footsteps echoing through the empty building. In front of the door he stopped, looking at it. On the frosted glass he could read *O'DAY & VANNER INVESTIGATIONS*. He thought maybe he'd be altering the name soon. He thought O'Day would look better by itself.

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He got out his key ; put his hand on the door knob. The door was open. He wondered about that too. It wasn't like Trundle not to have locked the door when she left. Maybe, he thought, she'd come back for something and forgotten to lock the door.

He went into the office. Trundle's typing desk and, on the left of the room, her other desk, were orderly. She was a tidy person. Everything looked normal. He went into his own room ; switched on the light. He stood in the doorway, looking at it.

From where he stood he could see that the right-hand drawer of his desk had been smashed open. The drawer was three-quarters open, the lock burst. O'Day sighed. He walked slowly across the room ; stood looking at the drawer. There had been nothing in it except half a bottle of whisky. He'd always kept it locked, but Trundle had a key in case she wanted to leave a confidential message on one of the occasions when he came back to the office late. There was no manilla envelope with the letter which Needham had written him, and there was no money. But there were a few pieces of charred paper in the ash-tray on the desk and, lying in the bottom of the open drawer, was a torn half sheet of quarto paper. Typed across it were the words :

" I hope you like this, sucker. I can do with the money and I burned the letter that was with it. I was too bored to read it, and it might annoy you. This is just a little on account. R.V."

O'Day sighed again. He closed the drawer ; turned off the light ; went through the outer office. He

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closed and locked the outer office door. He thought he'd certainly have to get someone to paint out the name of 'Vanner' on the door.

He walked slowly down the stairs. On the way down his mind switched back to Merys Vanner. He thought she was a very interesting person—so interesting that most of the time you didn't know which way her mind worked. He thought that somehow for his own sake he's have to find that out.

He drove through the deserted West End, through Kensington on to the Staines road. He sat relaxed behind the driving wheel, a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. He thought it was too bad about the seven hundred and fifty pounds, especially at a time like this. He wondered what Vanner was going to do with it. Maybe, he thought, he'd use it to begin divorce proceedings. O'Day's mouth twisted into a cynical smile.

Thirty-two miles outside London he swung the car into a side road. He drove down a long carriage-way ; pulled up eventually at an attractive house shielded from the road by a line of trees. It stood in a courtyard, and the moon illuminated its antique front and portico.

O'Day parked the car in the courtyard ; rang the bell. He waited patiently until the door was opened. Then he said : " Good evening."

The man inside looked like a family retainer. He wore striped trousers and a black, alpaca jacket. His hair was grey with long side-whiskers. He looked almost benevolent.

He said : " Good evening, Mr. O'Day. We haven't seen you for a long time."

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"Is there anything doing?" asked O'Day.

The man nodded. "On the first floor—not many—but what's going is very good." He smiled benignly.

O'Day asked: "Where's Mr. Favrola?"

"In his office," said the man. "He's alone."

O'Day handed over his hat. "I'll have a word with him. Don't bother to announce me." He walked across the wide hall; furnished with old oak furniture, down a passage-way. There was a heavy curtain at the end. O'Day pulled aside the curtain, knocked on the door; went in.

The room was well-appointed. A fire was burning in the grate. On the other side of the room was a large oak desk, and behind it sat Favrola—fat, placid, immaculately dressed, his dinner jacket looking as if it had just come from under the tailor's iron.

He got up. "I am glad to see you, Mr. O'Day. It ees a long time since we 'ave seen you."

O'Day said: "It's a long time since I have had any money to play with."

"A leetle drink?" asked Favrola. He opened a cupboard beside his desk; produced a bottle of Bourbon and two glasses, a carafe of water. He poured out two neat drinks; handed one to O'Day; poured out a chaser of water in another glass; put it on the edge of the desk.

He said: "You are in the luck again, Mr. O'Day? But then you're always lucky, aren't you?"

"Sometimes. . . . It depends on what you call lucky." O'Day drank a little of the Bourbon. "What goes on upstairs?"

Favrola shrugged. "A poker game, that ees all. Less and less people come 'ere these days, and if they

do come they are the sort of people we don' want. Too much money and no manners ! ”

O'Day asked : “ Any good gamblers ? ”

Favrola shrugged again. “ Mr. Darrell ees 'ere. It ees extraordinary. 'E 'as been winning a lot of money lately. For nights he come 'ere and play anything—fero, chemin-de-fer, straight poker—anything you like. 'E won all the time. To-night 'e cannot do anything that ees right. So 'e got out of the poker game upstairs. 'E ees jus' standing watching them.” He smiled amiably. “ But per'aps he would gamble with you. . . . ”

O'Day finished his drink. “ Maybe I'll just look. I'll be seeing you.”

He went out of the room, back into the hallway, up the wide, curving flight of stairs. At the top he crossed the broad, thickly carpeted landing ; opened the double doors facing him. The room was so large that it looked empty. There were about ten tables, but they were all deserted except the one nearest the door where six people were playing poker. Sitting in a chair against the wall, sipping a brandy and soda, was Darrell.

O'Day went over to him. “ Good evening, Darrell. They tell me it hasn't been so good.”

Darrell shrugged his shoulders. He was a portly, bald-headed man with small eyes that sometimes looked good-humoured, sometimes cunning.

He said : “ Well, it comes and goes, you know. How's it been with you ? ”

“ Not so good,” said O'Day. “ I don't even know why I came here. I'm having a run of bad luck. I don't think I could win anything. You know—you

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get that feeling sometimes." He was watching Darrell. He saw a bright gleam come into the gambler's eyes.

Darrell said : " Well, it can go like that. Do you want to roll them ? "

O'Day said : " You meah poker dice ? "

Darrell nodded.

" Well, I don't want to," said O'Day, " but since I'm here I suppose I must. Ten throws and finish ? "

Darrell said : " Why not ? "

They went to the far end of the room. On a small table was set up an American dice cage.

O'Day said : " You go first. What's the stake ? "

" Ten pounds for me," said Darrell. " If I lose I double up." He spun the cage. It threw four queens. " Your luck's still not holding. Beat that, O'Day."

O'Day said : " It's not possible." He spun the cage. The dice rolled down the table. Four kings came up. " That must have been an odd stroke of luck. It seldom happens to me."

Darrell said : " Now it's for twenty and your money. I'll throw you for forty or nothing."

O'Day nodded.

A quarter of an hour later he went down the stairs. The hundred and thirty pounds had increased to six hundred and fifty.

At the bottom he turned down the passage-way ; went into Favrola's room. He said : " I'll have a drink with you. His luck's *still* not so good."

Favrola said : " What you mean ees that *your* luck ees *always* good. You tell me sometimes you are 'aving a run of bad luck. Mos' men would like to have one

of your runs of bad luck. God help anybody who was against you when it was what you call *good* luck."

O'Day said : " Well, I'll be seeing you. I suppose you haven't seen anything of Ralph Vanner—my partner—lately ? "

Favrola spread his hands. " I 'ave not and I don't want to. 'E comes here and if 'e wins a leetle money 'e gets very excited. If 'e loses money it ees not so good. You understand ? You know," Favrola continued, " I theenk there ees something wrong with that man. I theenk there ees something worrying heem. And 'e's drinking like a fish."

O'Day nodded. " He likes drinking. I suppose his wife hasn't been in here ? "

Favrola said : " Yes . . . once or twice. But not with heem. Sometimes with this man—sometimes with that."

O'Day asked : " Has she had any luck ? "

" I should theenk she always had luck," said Favrola. " She comes with some man and if 'e loses, well . . . what does she care ? If 'e wins, the next time she comes with heem she 'as a new brooch—sometimes diamonds—sometimes a bracelet." He smiled.

O'Day said : " You mean she's clever."

Favrola nodded. " I theenk she ees ver' clever. I often wonder how she came to marry a man like Ralph Vanner. No one could accuse heem of being clever."

O'Day said : " I suppose not. Well, I'll be seeing you ! "

He went out ; closed the door quietly behind him.

It was two-thirty when O'Day arrived back at his

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apartment. He went into the sitting-room ; switched on the electric fire. He mixed a whisky and soda ; sat in the big armchair looking into the red of the fire that was just turning into gold. He thought that life was a strange proposition whichever way you played it. It did what it liked with you. All sorts of things happened whether you wanted them to or not. You couldn't steer life. You could only go with it ; play it as it came ; play it off the cuff.

He began to think again about Merys Vanner ; to wonder what was in her mind. On the face of it, it all seemed very plain. She was in love with him and he'd turned her down. So she had faked some sort of story and gone to her husband to put him—O'Day—in bad. She talked Ralph Vanner into playing what she wanted him to play, and now Ralph was on the warpath.

O'Day lighted a cigarette. It all seemed very nice and clear, especially after his conversation with her. Or was it? Vanner had gone haywire ; was hitting the high spots ; drinking himself silly, probably considering a divorce. And in the meantime had got back on him—O'Day—as well as he could by burning Needham's letter ; by taking the seven hundred and fifty pounds. All this seemed obvious, but was it?

What did she expect to get out of this. Did she expect that O'Day would marry her? He grinned. He thought that Merys Vanner knew him too well for that, especially after what he'd told her in the past. So there might be something else to this obvious story. Merys, he thought, had a tortuous, peculiar mind. You never knew what she was playing at. A scheming

woman, he thought. She would use anything for her own advantage.

He stubbed out his cigarette. He thought that, actually, the way to play life was always obvious. You just followed your nose and hoped for the best.

He got up ; turned off the fire. He finished the whisky and soda ; went to bed.

II

O'Day woke up on Monday morning at ten o'clock. He rang for breakfast and when it was brought sat up in bed, drinking coffee, thinking about Needham. He remembered Needham—not too clearly, because lots of things had been happening at the time when he'd met him during the war years in America, but there was still a fairly clear picture in his mind.

Needham was a tall, thin New Englander. His mentality, O'Day had thought, was peculiar. He was almost Victorian in his outlook, especially about women, to whom he would not be very attractive. Needham had done him a good turn when O'Day, in the course of an investigation, had taken a short cut that was a little too short for the American authorities who were then employing him.

O'Day ate toast and marmalade, and thought he couldn't see Needham mixed up in any business about a woman that wasn't entirely proper. Or could he ? When it came to women you never knew a great deal about any man and even an ascetic type like Needham might go haywire if he met the right type of girl. The tougher they were the harder they fell. But he could

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easily imagine him worrying about a woman of whom he had been fond, to whom he had proposed and who had turned him down. O'Day thought that the fact that the American had been sufficiently in love with a woman to propose marriage to her would cause him to take quite an interest in her future. Apparently he had ; was not satisfied with it ; was worrying about it ; wanted to do something about it.

But why hadn't Needham come to see him about this business before ? He had been in England for some time and he left something which was to him important till the last two days of his stay. Then he'd gone off on some very private business. O'Day thought that he could guess about that one. Needham had been working on a line of American intelligence. He was a Colonel in the Intelligence Corps, and he was probably still doing some under-cover work for Uncle Sam.

O'Day sighed. He thought it was a pretty tough proposition to be handed a case about which you knew nothing except that *some* woman *somewhere* might be heading for *some* sort of trouble. He shrugged his shoulders.

He got out of bed ; bathed ; began to shave. Now his mind switched to Vanner. Something definite had to be done about Vanner. Or had it ? O'Day played with the idea of finding Vanner and talking sense to him in a very hard way. Then he thought that perhaps the idea wasn't so good. Vanner had been sold a sensational story by Merys and believed it. Because, whatever his faults might be, Vanner was not fundamentally dishonest. He wouldn't have stolen the Needham money out of the drawer unless he was

blind and in a hell of a rage. O'Day visualised him coming into the office ; smashing the drawer open ; opening the envelope ; stuffing the notes into his pocket ; then burning Needham's letter in the ash-tray on the desk. That was all right. That was the sort of thing that Vanner would do if he was in one of his insensate rages brought on by too much liquor and a vindictive jealousy about Merys. And it was like him to have typed the note. He could never write—at least not legibly—when he was cock-eyed.

So he'd sat down at Trundle's desk, typed out the note, put it in the drawer and cleared out without bothering to lock the door behind him. That was all in the picture. And these guesses did not presuppose that Vanner was going to listen to reason. Therefore, why bother about it ? O'Day wondered what he was going to do about anything. He thought "when in doubt don't" was a very good motto for people who liked doing nothing. But his mental make-up was much too active for that process. And he was annoyed. Underneath his suave exterior—although he seldom got excited about anything—O'Day was extremely annoyed with the situation.

The business which he'd carefully built up by himself before Vanner had ever come into the partnership was getting a pretty bad reputation. Something had to be done about that. He came to the conclusion that thinking about things wasn't a great deal of help.

He telephoned the garage for the car. When the porter rang through to say that it had arrived he packed a suit-case ; had it taken down to the car.

He said to the porter : " I may be back. I may not.

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If any messages come through for me write them out and leave them in my room."

He got into the car ; drove in the direction of Long Acre. He thought that his instructions to the porter might be amusing. It presupposed that he might be going somewhere. If he were, he wasn't quite certain where. But the idea was there and who knows—it might be a good one !

When he went into his office Miss Trundle was sitting at her desk examining her finger-nails. Miss Trundle was not at all like her name. She was of middle height, of good figure and had a definite clothes sense. She was a medium blonde and wore light shell glasses which added a whimsical touch of almost grandmotherliness to a very attractive face. She had been with O'Day since he had started the business. She did not like Vanner. She did not like Merys Vanner. Her attitude towards O'Day was a little odd—at least *she* thought so. She wasn't quite certain whether she disapproved of him or whether she was rather fond of him. Actually, although she didn't realise it, the two things went together.

She said : " Good morning, Mr. O'Day. I'm afraid there's been a spot of bother." She said this with a bright smile as if it were something pleasant and not too important.

" I know," said O'Day. " I was here on Saturday night. Somebody burst my whisky drawer open and took an envelope out. You're perturbed about it, aren't you ? "

She said : " Not if you aren't."

O'Day turned round the chair at her typing table so that it faced her. He sat down.

"Look, Nellie," he said, "what went on here on Saturday morning?"

She said: "Well, it was perhaps unfortunate that I didn't know where you were. I didn't know where Mr. Vanner was—not that *that* mattered. A gentleman called Colonel Needham came in. It would be about half-past ten. He wanted to see you particularly. I thought he was pleasant. He was tall and stern in a rather nice sort of way. With iron grey hair. In fact he seemed a very nice type of man—a responsible type, if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean—the sort of man that any woman would be safe with." O'Day grinned at Miss Trundle.

She said: "Well, if you want to put it that way—yes. He definitely wasn't *your* type of man."

"Nuts," said O'Day. "Well, what happened?"

"I told him that I didn't know where you were; that I'd already been through to your apartment and you'd left; nobody knew where you'd gone to, but you'd taken a suit-case. I knew that didn't mean a lot, but I told him that it was improbable that you would be back at your apartment over the week-end; that I didn't know where to reach you, but that I thought you'd be in touch with the office on Monday—that is to-day.

"He said that wasn't any good; that he was leaving England on Saturday afternoon. Then I asked him if Mr. Vanner would do. I said I might possibly be able to find Mr. Vanner. He said he didn't want to see Mr. Vanner. He sat down and smoked a cigarette; then he asked if he could write a letter to you and if I would make certain that you

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got it directly you arrived. So I put him in the waiting room ; gave him a pad. He was there for quite some time. Then he asked me for a large envelope, I gave him one.

"When he came out of the waiting room he gave me the envelope. He said he wanted you to have it as soon as possible. I told him that you might possibly look in at the office on Sunday if you came back to London, and that I would put it in a drawer where I left messages for you. I went out for coffee and when I came back I put it in the whisky drawer and locked it."

"Is that all he said ?" asked O'Day.

"No. He said good morning and was going out of the office. When he got to the door he said could he have your address because he'd like to leave another note for you there in case you went there before you came to the office. I gave it to him. I thought he looked the sort of person who ought to have it."

O'Day nodded. "Fine. Did anything else happen ?"

"Yes. . . ." Her tone changed slightly. There was an acid note in it. "Mrs. Vanner came through. I don't know what the time was, but I should think it would be about ten o'clock. She asked if you were in. I said no. She asked if I knew where you were. I said no . . . had she tried your apartment ? She said yes, you weren't there. So I told her," said Miss Trundle almost archly, "that I was afraid I couldn't help her."

O'Day got up. "You liked telling her that, didn't you ?"

Miss Trundle said nothing.

O'Day went into his office. He walked about for a few minutes. Then he came out ; stood in the doorway between his office and the outer one.

He asked : " What's the post like ? "

" Indifferent," said Miss Trundle. " Nothing very much. The International & General came through this morning and asked when they were going to have the reports on the four cases we are investigating for them. I told them I thought they could have them this afternoon."

O'Day asked : " Why ? "

" They came in this morning. Mr. Vanner sent them."

" Where did he send them from ? " asked O'Day.

" I don't know. There was just an envelope with the typewritten reports. A boy brought them with Mr. Vanner's compliments. There was no note with them—just nothing at all."

" What do the reports look like ? " asked O'Day.

She said : " Very good. I was surprised, having regard to the state that Mr. Vanner's been in during the last three or four days. I didn't think he'd be working."

O'Day said : " Maybe he got somebody else to do the check-up for him. He's done it before when he's been on a binge. All right. Write a letter to the Assessors Department of the International & General and send the reports round with my compliments by hand." He yawned. " Then you'd better get someone to paint the name ' Vanner ' out on the door. This is going to be ' O'Day Investigations ' in future."

She said : " I like that, Mr. O'Day."

" Who cares about your opinion ? " O'Day grinned

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at her. He was trying to co-relate in his mind Vanner's hitting the high spots for five days, stealing the money, burning the Needham letter, and at the same time bothering to get somebody to cover the International & General investigations. He thought it didn't add up.

He said : " I'm going to get my hair cut. You find out for me just where the Sable Inn is, will you ? I believe it's in Devonshire. Let me know the mileage and the best road."

" Very well, Mr. O'Day. . . ."

O'Day stopped at the door. He said : " If Vanner got somebody to check on these Assessor's reports for him I wonder who he'd use. Have you any idea, Nellie ? "

She considered for a moment, then : " I know he's used Martin of the Trans-Ocean Company before, and another man from Digby's, but from the look of those reports"—she smiled—" the English wasn't too good—I'd say he got Windemere Nikolls of Callaghan Investigations to do them for him."

" That could be. Get on to Nikolls and find out if he did the job for Vanner. If he says yes, say I'll 'phone him tomorrow and make an appointment. I'd like to talk to him."

" Very well, Mr. O'Day. I'll get through at once."

O'Day walked round to the barbers. Whilst they were cutting his hair he made up his mind what he was going to do.

When he got back to the office at twelve o'clock, Miss Trundle said : " The Sable Inn is a two star A.A. inn. It's just off the main road between Totnes and Dartford—quite easy to find because the A.A. say if

you keep to the main road there's a notice-board when you come to the turning that leads to the inn. If you drive at your usual rate it ought to take you about five and a half hours."

O'Day said : "O.K. Did you get in touch with Nikolls ?"

She nodded. "It was Nikolls did the job for Mr. Vanner. I told him you'd give him a ring tomorrow ; that you wanted to talk to him. He said he'd be glad to see you."

O'Day sat down on the typing table. He said : "Nellie, listen to me. I expect you've noticed a certain atmosphere in this office for the last three or four months."

"I'm not dumb, blind or silly," said Miss Trundle. "You mean Mrs. Vanner ?"

"I mean Mrs. Vanner. I'm going away. I may be back some time tomorrow. I might be longer. Play things along while I'm gone. If you can, find out where Vanner is. If Mrs. Vanner should come to the office by any chance, tell her I'm away ; you don't know where I am or when I'll be back. Have you got that ?"

She nodded.

He went on : "There's something else. You remember Macguire—the officer in the special branch who was doing liaison work with American Intelligence details over here during the war ? Get in touch with him. Make it a personal thing. Say that I'd be very glad if he'd ring my flat tomorrow night and, if I'm not there, try each day till he gets me. I want to talk to him particularly."

"Very well, Mr. O'Day."

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"And get me some of those old business cards," said O'Day.

Miss Trundle opened a drawer ; took out a small box. She opened it ; dropped the cards out on to the palm of her hand ; gave them to O'Day. He went through the little pile of cards ; selected one which read "*Mr. John Sheridan, 14 Marlows Road, London, S.W.5. Legal enquiries. Divorce Investigations.*"

He said : "This one will do." He put it in his pocket.

He picked up his hat ; walked to the door. "I'll be seeing you. Don't do anything that I wouldn't like to see reported in the public prints !" He grinned at her ; closed the door ; went down the stairs.

Miss Trundle thought she didn't know whether she liked him very much or whether he was just a rather attractive man who'd bitten off more than he could chew. For a moment she thought she didn't care very much, after which she qualified the idea. She thought that biting off more than you could chew wasn't a bad idea if you eventually managed to chew it ! She thought O'Day would eventually chew it. He always did. Quite a man O'Day, Miss Trundle thought—even if he could be very annoying at times.

She shrugged her shoulders. She said : "What the hell !" Then she went back to work.

It was just after six when O'Day stopped the Jaguar in the attractive parking space before the Sable Inn. He got out of the car ; stood looking at the hotel. A half-timbered building, it lay well back from the side

road. At the sides and in the rear were well-kept gravel paths and shrubberies. There were no other cars parked in the courtyard.

O'Day went in. On the other side of the large and comfortably-furnished hallway was the reception office. He went over.

He said : " My name's Sheridan—John Sheridan. I'd like to see the manager."

The girl at the reception desk looked him over carefully. She said : " Could I tell him what you want to see him about ? "

O'Day grinned at her. He shook his head. " It's confidential."

She said : " I'll let the manager know you're here, Mr. Sheridan." She went to the telephone at the rear of the office ; came back ; said : " Would you like to go along and see Mr. James ? His office is on the right of the passage-way on the other side of the hall."

O'Day nodded. " I'd like to stay the night," he said. " Could you arrange that ? "

" Of course." She smiled pleasantly at him.

O'Day crossed the hall ; found the door on the right of the passage-way. He went in.

James, the manager, was sitting at his desk doing accounts. He said : " What can I do for you, Mr. Sheridan ? "

O'Day gave him the card. James raised his eyebrows.

He said : " We don't get a lot of this sort of thing here." He smiled at O'Day.

O'Day said : " Maybe not, but this place looks attractive enough for any co-respondent to pick." He

went on : " About three or four weeks ago a lady—I'm not quite certain about the name—stayed here. I think she probably wrote for a reservation for herself and her husband. You made the reservation and she arrived fairly late. I think it's quite possible that the night porter may have been the only person on duty. She told him that her husband would be arriving later ; then she went up to her room. I've an idea that the husband arrived and managed—by picking his time carefully—to get up to the bedroom without being seen by the night porter. And when he got up the next morning the night porter was off duty. I think it's quite possible that nobody remembers what he looked like. I wonder if you could help me ? "

The manager said : " I'd like to do anything I could, of course." He hesitated. " But this thing isn't awfully good publicity for us, Mr. Sheridan. This is an old-fashioned hotel and——"

O'Day put his hand up. " I'll make you a promise, Mr. James. You give me the information I want and I'll see that this place is kept out of it. You understand that if nobody can give definite evidence about having seen the gentleman—and I think it's very likely that nobody will be able to, because this thing was played very cleverly—then it wouldn't be any use asking anybody here to give evidence. In other words, I'd have to look elsewhere. But what I want to do here is to ascertain, purely for my own use, that the parties did stay here."

The manager said : " All right, Mr. Sheridan. If you keep us out of it I'll do what I can for you. What would you like to do ? "

" I'd like to talk to the night porter."

James said : " Well, you can't do that yet. He comes on at about ten o'clock at night. But "—he smiled—" if you like to go down to the public house at the cross roads—the Green Apple—I'll bet you a shilling you'll find him in the private bar. He spends most of his off time there. His name's Mellins. You can't mistake him. He's tall and thin and grey. He looks very depressed even if he isn't."

O'Day said : " Thanks a lot. Maybe we can have a drink together later. I'm staying here tonight."

James said : " I'll be glad to see you."

O'Day went out. He asked the girl in the reception office to have his bag sent up to his room. He walked down the road towards the cross roads.

As he went into the Green Apple he thought that a great deal depended on Mellins, the night porter—much more than Mellins would ever guess.

He found that worthy on a settle, a pint pot in his hand. There was only one other person in the private bar. O'Day sat down beside Mellins. He opened his note case ; produced a five-pound note. He folded it carefully between his fingers.

He said : " Mellins, I've just left Mr. James. I'm making some enquiries about some people who stayed at the inn three weeks ago. He said you'd give me all the help you could."

He handed over the five-pound note. Mellins took it as a matter of course. He looked more depressed than ever as he stuffed the note into the pocket of his waistcoat.

He said : " Would you be meaning that pretty lady ? "

" That's the one," said O'Day. " She's striking,

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isn't she? Did she look like this?" He described Merys Vanner.

"That's the one," said Mellins. "A rare piece, Mister . . . I'm telling you!"

O'Day said: "So you remember all about it?"

The night porter nodded. "I remember her . . . I remember her because it's usually the man who gives me a tip, but she looked after me. Two pounds she gave me when she came here and two pounds when she went."

O'Day said: "You didn't see her husband, did you?"

Mellins shook his head. "I go off at eight o'clock in the morning. And I didn't go back after I went out to take the note for her down to the garage on the main road."

"What note?" asked O'Day.

Mellins said: "Well, she came to the hotel between eleven and twelve, I'd say, and she signed the register and said her husband would be coming along later. She said he had some business in Totnes. Well, the reservation was made for them, so I took her upstairs; carried up her bag."

O'Day asked: "How did she arrive?"

"She came in a hired car from Totnes. Then about midnight she called down to me and asked if I could make her some tea. So I went down to the kitchen. We never lock the doors here at night. There's nobody around these parts and nobody ever comes in. So I reckon he arrived while I was making the tea, because when I came up I saw the car parked outside. When I took the tea up he was in the bathroom, so I never thought anything about it at the time."

O'Day said : " What about the note ? "

" I'll tell you," said Mellins. " The next morning the chambermaid comes down about a quarter to eight. She's got a note from the gentleman. He wants me to go to the nearest garage and get 'em to pick up his car—clean the plugs, do the tyres, put water in, do some other repairs and put ten gallons of petrol in. The coupons was pinned to the note. He told the garage just what he wanted 'em to do. There was two pounds with it. So I went down to the garage when I went off ; gave them the note."

" Then you never saw the husband ? " queried O'Day. " Did anybody see him ? "

Mellins shook his head. " Not as far 'as I know. That'd be easy because the day porter's always busy doing something or other. Maybe when they brought his car back he just went out and got into it. She could pay the bill and join him. So nobody'd see him. It's easy in a place like this."

O'Day nodded. " One other question. What was the garage you took the note to ? "

" Chaloners," said Mellins. " You go down to the main road and you turn left towards Dartmouth. It's fifty or sixty yards down the road—just a couple of shacks, but since the war young Chaloner's been doing repairs. He's pretty good. He was in one of them motor units in the army."

" What time does Chaloner's garage close ? " asked O'Day.

" Oh, any time . . . they're usually hanging around there until half-past seven or eight o'clock. But if they're shut and you want to talk to them they live next door in the cottage."

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"That's fine," said O'Day. "Let us have a drink. . . ."

After a second whisky and soda, O'Day left the Green Apple ; walked down towards the main road. He found Chaloner's garage and young Chaloner at work in the workshop.

Young Chaloner remembered the incident very well.

"We don't often get a call to go and pick a car up," he said. "Usually they come here. We had a note about what was to be done to her. She was a nice car. I had quite a bit of trouble finding things out about her."

"What make of car?" asked O'Day.

"An American left-hand-drive Buick," said Chaloner. "A new one. She hadn't done more than six or seven thousand miles. I fixed her up; took her back and left her outside the Sable. I left the keys in the office."

O'Day said: "You wouldn't have that note, would you—the instructions that were sent down as to what you were to do to the car? If you could find that note," he added with a smile, "it'd be worth five pounds to me."

Chaloner rubbed his hands on some cotton waste. "We always spike 'em. Anything like that. We got a spike in the shop. Maybe it's there. There aren't too many of 'em. We don't do enough business." He grinned ruefully at O'Day.

O'Day said: "Let's look, shall we?"

They went to the corner of the work-shop where a long nail was driven into the wall. A couple of dozen pieces of paper were stuck on it—accounts, old bills—

most of them oil-stained. The young man began to take them off. It was the last piece of paper.

He said : " There you are, sir, That's the easiest job I've done for a fiver for a long time." He handed the piece of paper to O'Day who put it in his pocket.

O'Day said : " Nice work. There's the fiver. Maybe tomorrow you'd like to pick my car up and service it. It's outside the inn. Here are the keys."

Young Chaloner said : " This has been a good day for me." He grinned. " I'll go to Newton Abbot races next time and play it up a bit."

O'Day said : " Why not? Always follow your luck when it's in. So long."

He walked slowly back to the Sable Inn. He went to the reception desk. " Could I look at the register ? " he asked.

The girl said : " Yes, Mr. Sheridan. Mr. James said you'd probably want to."

O'Day began to turn over the pages of the register. It didn't take him long to find it. It was twenty-two days before. It was a registration for a double room for " Mr. and Mrs. Terence O'Day."

O'Day sighed ; closed the register. He said : " Thanks a lot."

He went up to his bedroom ; switched on the light. Then he phoned down for a large whisky and soda.

He took the piece of paper from his pocket ; went under the light ; examined it. He whistled. The note was uninteresting enough. It said : "*Please clean plugs, adjust carburettor if you know how to. Put in ten gallons and water. Tyre pressure twenty-eight front thirty back. Check the oil. When you bring the car back leave the keys and the account at the reception.*"

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Not very interesting, thought O'Day. But what *was* interesting was that the note was written by the same person who'd left the note for him at his flat—Nicholas Needham.

O'Day sat down in the chintz-covered armchair. Even he was surprised. . . .

He said : " Well, I'll be damned ! "

III

It was six o'clock on Tuesday evening when O'Day stopped his car outside his apartment block ; went upstairs. There were no messages.

He took off his coat ; mixed himself a whisky and soda ; carried it into the bedroom ; lay on the bed. He lay there looking at the ceiling, trying to shape in his mind some basis for the very peculiar connection between Merys Vanner and Needham.

He thought that perhaps it wasn't so difficult to understand. Underneath his New Englander's austerity, Needham, he supposed, was human enough—certainly human enough to fall for Merys Vanner if she wanted him to fall for her. It would be interesting, thought O'Day, to know just how they'd met ; just why Merys had selected Needham as her companion for the Sable Inn adventure. It wouldn't be difficult, O'Day ruminated, to steer him through the process. She probably knew the Sable Inn. Maybe she'd stayed there before. She must have been quietly amused at the idea of writing his—O'Day's—name in the register. O'Day grinned. His sense of humour was even broad enough to appreciate that fact.

The telephone on the bedside table jangled. It was Macguire.

O'Day said : " Listen, Mac. Will you do something for me—just a personal thing ? "

Macguire said : " I know—just another of those personal things, hey ? " • What trouble are you up to now ? "

" I'm not up to any trouble. I'm in a spot of trouble. I'm trying to get out."

Macguire asked : " What is it you want, Terry ? "

O'Day said : " During the war you were acting as liaison between men of the U.S. Intelligence groups operating in this country and your own section. Remember ? "

" So what ? " said Macguire.

" Only this," O'Day went on. " One of these eggs was a Colonel Nicholas Needham in the U.S. Intelligence. Rather a nice type of man. Well, Needham's been over here. He came to my office and left a note for me with some money. He wanted me to do something for him—a personal sort of job. He didn't see me because I was out of town and he left for Africa the same evening ; didn't say where he was going because he's on some hush-hush sort of job. When I got back to my office I found there'd been an accident. My fool secretary, sealing a package, accidentally set fire to the letter he'd left for me. She lost her head and the thing was burned. • But I do know this much. I know the rough purport of the letter.

" He wanted me to make a contact with a friend of his. I've an idea he wanted to help this friend over a tough spot. I also know that he met this friend in the district where he was stationed during the war.

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If you could tell me where that was, Mac, maybe I could make a contact and find this unknown person."

Macguire said : " That sounds fair enough. That should be pretty easy. We've still got lists as to where the different sections worked. In fact the whole scheme's still there in case some day somebody wanted to use it again. I'll call you back tonight or tomorrow morning according to how long it takes me to check up."

" Thanks a lot, Mac." O'Day hung up ; finished the whisky and soda. Then he put his hands behind his head and went to sleep.

It was nearly midnight when he woke up. He looked at his watch ; yawned, got off the bed ; went into the bathroom. He took a warm bath ; put on his dinner jacket, a black soft hat ; got into the car and drove towards Piccadilly. He parked the car in Berkeley Street ; walked across the square ; turned into a mews ; went into the Pimento Club.

The Pimento Club was just another of those places. If it had lasted longer than most of them it was perhaps because the proprietor had an acute sense of business, a sense of humour and was reasonable enough to know that you can do quite a lot of things which are not quite so hot, but you can't do too many of them. He never did, so he remained open.

The membership of the Pimento was as varied as the decorations which showed dimly under the rose-pink, shaded lights. All sorts of people belonged—quite nice people, people who were not so nice and people who come somewhere in between. There was a small orchestra which played very well when it wasn't too tired, a dozen waiters who had learned that discretion

is the better part of valour and that keeping one's mouth shut is probably the safest course in the long run, a well-stocked bar and that peculiar air of casual *bonhomie* which some places of this sort are lucky enough to acquire.'

The proprietor was Irish Italian, which is a good enough mixture for anybody. He was plump, benevolent and he wore an expression of placid good-humour on his face which seemed to indicate that he was everybody's friend and could never possibly do harm to anyone—well, not much. In any event, he hoped that was what the expression indicated.

There were also two or three ladies of varying coiffure, bulk and temperament, who were always to be found on the club premises. Pat Manuello, the proprietor, described them as "my charming 'ostesses." And he was nearly right. They could be charming; also, if occasion demanded, slightly tough.

O'Day checked his hat in the cloak-room; made a wisecrack at the dark-haired Italian girl behind the counter; went into the small, softly-lighted bar at the end of the dance floor just behind the orchestra platform.

O'Shaughnessy, the bar tender, immaculate in his white jacket was leaning up against the wall behind the bar, stifling a yawn. He thought that it was too late for him to be out of bed and too early for there to be much business, because most of the Pimento business came between one and three o'clock in the morning—why, I can't tell you; neither could he.

O'Day ordered a large whisky and soda.

O'Shaughnessy said: "We haven't seen you for a time, Mr. O'Day. Maybe you've been busy."

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O'Day sat on a stool. "I've been very busy. I suppose you haven't seen Mr. Vanner tonight—or Mrs. Vanner?"

O'Shaughnessy shook his head. "I haven't seen either of them for a month or so. Mr. Vanner used to come here a lot. Maybe he's got tired of the place."

O'Day lighted a cigarette. He asked: "How much money does he owe in the bar?"

O'Shaughnessy smiled sadly. "He doesn't owe a thing in the bar, Mr. O'Day. Officially I'm the one who's owing it. Mr. Manuello won't allow accounts to be run here. It's cash on the nail. Sometimes in the restaurant, yes, but here no. So I've carried the can back."

O'Day asked: "How much?"

"Fifteen and a half pounds," said O'Shaughnessy. "I've been hoping to see Mr. Vanner. I could do with the money. He's always paid before."

O'Day put his hand in his pocket; counted out three five-pound notes on to the bar. He put a pound note on top of them.

He said: "The ten shillings extra is for yourself. Where's Mabel?"

"In the ladies' room," said O'Shaughnessy. "She's got a new make-up from America—Revlon lipstick and a new shade of pancake which makes her look like nobody's business."

O'Day said: "Look, tell the woman in the ladies' room I'd like to talk to Mabel. Tell her I'll be sitting at the corner table on the dance floor. And order some food for me, O'Shaughnessy—chops or anything you can get; maybe a steak. Send one for her too."

"I'll do that, Mr. O'Day." O'Shaughnessy dis-

appeared through the door in the wall behind the bar.

O'Day finished his drink ; went out of the bar, across the dance room floor ; sat at the table which he usually used—the one in the corner. He waited patiently.

After a few minutes,* Miss Mabel Bonaventura appeared at the other end of the dance floor ; sailed gracefully across the empty room towards O'Day. And when I say sailed, I mean just that. Everything about Miss Bonaventura was slightly, and almost attractively, artificial. Her name was actually Mabel Higgins, but she thought that didn't sound quite so good as Bonaventura, which somebody had told her meant 'good adventure,' which good adventure she hoped was always waiting round the corner. She looked vaguely exotic and had an expression on her face which seemed to indicate that she was rather surprised at the fact.

She was wearing a tight-fitting, well-cut, black dinner frock, with a long silk fringe just below the knees and hand-worked gold spangled epaulettes on the shoulders. Her hair was startling—blonde-coloured, all the more amazing because it was natural—she didn't believe in hair dyes. Her figure was lissom, well-rounded in the right places, and she walked in a manner which could only be described as very sophisticated. Her walk seemed to promise a great deal, and the promise was possibly contradicted by the supreme air of unconsciousness which she assumed. There was one other, rather startling thing about Miss Bonaventura. That was her voice.

When the evening started this voice was low, cooing and might be described as rather well-bred. She

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pronounced her words with an incisiveness which she believed showed aristocratic breeding. But as the evening wore into night, and the night into morning, and as Miss Bonaventura took on a load, as she would call it, then, whisky and soda being it seemed her main support in life, the coo disappeared from her voice, and the accent went with it. At three o'clock in the morning some of her utterances could be described as startling. Now she was at her 'between' period. It was after twelve and up to the moment she had absorbed six large whiskies and sodas. When she remembered to coo she cooed, but she was just beginning to forget.

She drew the gilt chair from under the table opposite O'Day with a well-kept hand, garnished with scarlet finger-nails and some good imitation jewellery. She sat down.

She said: "Well, if it isn't Terence! It does my heart good to see you once again, Mr. O'Day. I can't tell you how I've missed you."

"Don't try, Mabel," said O'Day. "Would you like some food? There's some coming."

"Why not," said Mabel. "I like eating."

"And a large whisky and soda I think," said O'Day. "We might have that now." He signalled to a waiter who was leaning against the wall on the other side of the room with a faraway expression in his eyes. He ordered two large whiskies and sodas.

Miss Bonaventura cocked one arched eyebrow. She asked: "What is it, Terry? Whenever you send for me, and stand me supper and a few drinks, there's always some strings to it—not that I mind any strings with you. I like you."

O'Day asked : "Just how much do you like my partner, Ralph Vanner?"

Miss Bonaventura tossed her head. She tossed it so vehemently that the cluster of curls caught in the watered silk ribbon behind the nape of her neck wagged from side to side.

She said : "Him . . . ! I don't like him at all. He's not the type of man that I like. You know what I think?" She leaned across the table and fixed O'Day with two wide open, blue eyes. She repeated : "You know what I think, Terry? Last time I saw that man I said to myself : Here is a person who is no bleeding gentleman? That's what I said. What's more——" She paused as if stating some fact of world importance. "What's more I think I'm right. I don't like him."

O'Day said : "I'll tell you something. I don't like him either—not at the moment. He's annoying me a little. Tell me something, Mabel—the last time you saw him, how was he, and what was he talking about?"

"He was talking about his wife. I've never been able to understand his attitude to his wife. A very nice woman—good-looking. She's got allure . . . that's what she's got. You know what I've always said," continued Mabel, "it doesn't matter whether a woman's got big feet and no figure. It doesn't matter a goddam thing, so long as she's got allure. You're telling me!"

O'Day grinned. "What's your definition of allure, Mabel?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "How would I know? Who d'you think I am—William Shakespeare? You know what allure is as well as I do. If a woman's got

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what it takes she's got allure. If she hasn't she may as well resign. She's had it."

O'Day nodded. "All right. Well, Merys Vanner's got allure. Not only that but she's good-looking. Did Vanner have anything to say about her?"

Mabel said darkly: "What's all this in aid of? Is there more trouble in that quarter?"

O'Day nodded. An expression of frankness came into his face. "I'm going to put my cards down. Actually, I think she's trying to make a little trouble between Vanner and me, see?"

"I see. And don't think I'm surprised. You know what I've always thought about her. I've always thought she was looking for a co-respondent. You know what I mean—a really good co-respondent, see?" She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't blame her. If I were her I'd probably be thinking the same way myself. But definitely, I'd do anything to get away from that push-over."

O'Day asked: "What did he say about her—anything in particular?"

She drank half the large whisky and soda at one gulp.

"He said plenty to me. He's always talked to me, you know. He was talking about you. What he didn't say about you was just nobody's business. But what he did say. Oh, boy . . . ! He doesn't like you. He thinks you're the guy who's broken up the family."

O'Day asked: "What about the other ones?"

She spread her hands. "You know how it is. I don't think he's ever taken any of them seriously. Maybe he thought she was just indulging in a mild flirtation to make him sort of jealous, see? Well, he

doesn't think that way about you. If you're stuck on her you watch your step."

"I'm not stuck on her, and I am watching my step, Mabel." He went on: "Vanner's always liked you, hasn't he?"

She nodded. "I think he has . . . yes. . . . Whenever he's been here he always likes talking to me. He likes to sort of confide in me. I'm not saying he hasn't made a pass at me once or twice either—usually when he was sober. Maybe something in me appeals to him." She smiled, showing a set of very good teeth. "Maybe it's the mother in me."

"But you weren't playing?" said O'Day.

"No . . . I wasn't playing. Why should I? Vanner's a meanie. He never gives a girl a thing. He's one of those 'take all and give nothing' guys. You know, I've often thought with a little bit of encouragement he'd go right overboard for me." She pushed a stray tendril of blonde hair into place. "I suppose I've got something. I suppose *I've* got allure!"

O'Day said: "You bet you have. How would you like to earn fifty or sixty pounds, Mabel?"

She looked at the half-empty glass of whisky and soda. She asked: "How do I have to earn it?"

"Next time Vanner comes in," said O'Day, "if he does come in, spoil him. Go all out for him. Make him talk. Take him round to that nice flat of yours if you like. It's quite attractive, and you've got medals for looking after yourself." He smiled at her. "I want to know everything I can about Vanner; what he's playing at; what his ideas are; what he thinks he's going to do."

She said: "That's a pretty large order, isn't it,

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Terry? I don't even know what I'm getting at, do I?"

"I'll tell you. I have an idea that Vanner thinks he's going to divorce his wife."

She whistled softly. "You don't say. And who's the co-respondent going to be?"

"Vanner thinks at the moment it's going to be me. I don't think so," said O'Day.

She said: "Well, whether it's going to be or not, you can't just say a thing like that. You've got to prove it, haven't you?"

O'Day nodded. "Proof's a funny thing. There's such a thing as circumstantial evidence and if a divorce court likes to think that misconduct's taken place it can think it, whether it has or not, see?"

"I see, Terry. What you mean is that maybe somebody's trying to take you for a ride. I'll make five guesses who it is. I'd be right first time."

He said: "Make one guess, Mabel."

"Merys Vanner. . . . She's stuck on you, isn't she? Anybody can see that. I've noticed the way she's looked at you. Is she trying to be funny too?"

O'Day nodded. "Now you've got the story, do you think you'd like the job?"

"Why not?" said Mabel. "I like you, Terry. Do you know why? You're about the only guy who's played around this place and never made a pass at me. I think you're a nice guy; I'll do it. There's only one thing you've got to do."

O'Day asked: "What?"

"Make it seventy-five pounds, baby, and I'm all yours."

O'Day smiled. "O.K., Mabel. It's seventy-five

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pounds. You get twenty-five now and fifty when you've got some real information for me." He took a card from his notecase ; pushed it across the table. " There's my private number at home. Don't ring the office. When you want me give me a call."

" O.K., Terry," said Mabel. " I'll do what I can."

The waiter approached with the tray. She leaned over ; took the cover from the dish. She said : " My God . . . steak . . . ! I'd do *anything* for steak."

IV

O'Day stood up against the bar in the Silver Grill in Albemarle Street, drinking a large whisky and soda, eating a salad sandwich. He looked at his strap-watch. It was seven o'clock. O'Day thought a hell of a lot could happen in a few hours.

On Saturday morning when he'd decided to go to the Plumpton race meeting, he was concerned with one fact only, and that was that Vanner was on a jag ; that he hadn't showed up for several days. Now there were a lot of other things. O'Day thought that it never rained but it poured !

Well, it was pouring all right now. O'Day grinned. It looked, he thought, like permanent bad weather unless somebody could find some means of talking sense to Vanner. The question was whether Vanner was even going to listen whilst Merys was allowed to go on mixing the poison.

And how did you stop Merys ? O'Day thought that, at the moment, he didn't know the answer to that one.

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Somebody said : " Good evenin', Terry. 'How's it goin' ? "

Windemere Nikolls eased his large bulk on to the chair next to O'Day.

O'Day said : " It could be worse. Have a drink ? "

" Sure thing. I'd like rye if they've got it."

O'Day ordered a large rye whisky. He said : " Windy, you did a job for my partner Vanner I believe—some reports for the Assessors Department of the International & General. Would you like to tell me about it ? "

" Why not ? " Nikolls produced a packet of Lucky Strikes from his pocket. " Vanner saw me on Monday last week. He said that the work was overdue ; that you were away and he was gonna be busy. He reckoned he hadn't time to do it, so he asked me if I'd like the job. I said sure thing ; we weren't doing much in the office. I said I'd cover the four reports. I did. He gave me twelve quid."

O'Day asked : " What sort of state was he in ? Was he cock-eyed or fairly sober ? "

" He was all right," said Nikolls. " Looked a bit tired like as if maybe he had a hangover, but he seemed O.K. Why ? " He grinned at O'Day. " Has he been hittin' the high spots again ? That guy sure does like his liquor—except he don't know how to use it properly."

O'Day said : " Maybe." He went on : " And that was all he asked you to do, Windy ? "

" Well, it wasn't actually ; there was something else he wanted me to do, but I wasn't playin', see ? "

" Such as what ? " asked O'Day.

Nikolls shrugged his shoulders. " He's got some

funny idea in his head about you. He told me he had an idea that you'd stayed at some dump called the Sable Inn or something like that in Devonshire with his wife two or three week-ends before. He wanted me to go down and do a check-up."

"What did you do about it?"

"Nothin'," said Nikolls. "I didn't like it. It's not my line. So I said there were lots of other guys would do that. I wasn't playin'."

"O.K. Thanks, Windy." O'Day got off the stool. "I'll be seein' you." He went out.

He picked up a cab at the end of Albemarle Street ; drove back to his apartment. When he opened the door there was a letter on the table in the hallway. He recognised Macguire's handwriting. It said :

"Dear Terry,

"It hasn't been difficult finding out about your friend Needham. He came over here with the first fair-sized American Intelligence detail. He was working in London for some time but from what you told me on the telephone that doesn't interest you a great deal. He had a half a dozen different jobs ; was in town for about six or eight months.

"Then he went down to a place near Alfriston in Sussex. He worked down there with some English Intelligence people at a big house that was used as a training school for parachute agents. You know the idea. He was down there for the rest of the war. He seemed to like it. I tried to get a line on any woman in the neighbourhood that he'd been fairly friendly with, but this wasn't easy because as you know people at these schools, which were very secret organisations, were not encouraged to make friends—in any

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big way I mean—with the local inhabitants. The security angles were very strong.

"Anyway, one or two people who were instructors at the school with whom I've been in touch, couldn't make any suggestions on this point except one of them—a Scot named MacDonald said he had the idea that Needham was the officer sent down there to take the house over; that it was a place called Mallowfield, belonging to some local family, and that the sitting tenant agreed to get out and allow the house to be requisitioned till the end of the war.

"He had an idea that this tenant was a woman; that she lived in a small house right on the other side of the grounds—which were extensive—called the Dower House. MacDonald said that maybe Needham was interested in somebody in the neighbourhood because he very seldom applied for leave and they used to pull his leg about it. He said they liked Needham; that he was a decent, straight guy, very fond of his work and respected by everyone. I hope this'll be of use to you. If it is, you can buy me a drink next time I see you.

Yours ever,

Patrick Macguire."

O'Day thought that was something anyway. Maybe the lady who was living in the Dower House, who had handed over her house to the Government for a parachute agents school, was the lady in the case. Just as easily of course it might not be, because life was seldom as easy as that. He thought possibly next day—Thursday—he'd go down to Alfriston and look round.

The telephone rang. O'Day picked up the receiver. Mabel Bonaventura's voice came through. By the

sound of it she'd had quite a few doubles. Her voice had gone up two or three tones and her enunciation had gone to hell.

O'Day said : " Well, Mabel ? "

" Listen, Terry. Am I a fast worker or am I lucky ? "

O'Day said : " I wouldn't know. You tell *me*. Have you seen Vanner ? "

" No, not a smell of him. He hasn't been near the Club. But Merys has. She came in at seven o'clock this evening. What for, God knows—I don't ! The place was just pulling itself together after last night. There was nobody here except me, O'Shaughnessy and two or three of the waiters."

O'Day asked : " Well, what did she come for ? Was she looking for Vanner ? "

" Maybe . . . I wouldn't know. If she was, she didn't find him. She found me instead. We had a heart-to-heart talk ; you know . . . all girls together."

O'Day said : " Yes. What did she talk about, Mabel ? "

" Mostly about Vanner." Miss Bonaventura hiccupped. " She doesn't like that guy. She said he was keeping away from her ; that she didn't quite know what had hit him beyond the fact that he'd got some ideas about her and you. She seemed in a funny sort of humour—a little bit excited. Then she said she wondered whether she'd have a show-down with Vanner or not ; that she was fed up with his attitude ; that she didn't know what he was going to do."

" You mean about the divorce ? " asked O'Day.

" Yes, that's how it seemed to me. It seemed that she was a little worried that perhaps he wasn't going to take it all seriously. She said she had a pretty good

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idea where he was going to be tonight, but she didn't think it was the time and place to talk to him."

"Did she say if she knew where he was going to be?"

"Yes," said Mabel. "He's got a date about twelve o'clock tonight at a Club called the Palissade—somewhere near Maidenhead. It seems he does some sort of business with the egg who owns this place. I said I didn't know any place in Maidenhead that keeps open until twelve o'clock at night. She said neither did she, but the owner lived on the premises round at the back, and that Vanner would go round there somewhere about twelve o'clock and wait till he showed up. She seemed in a very funny state of mind, Terry, if you know what I mean. She's a pretty cool customer usually, is Merys Vanner. But she seemed just a little bit excited. You know—excited but trying to sit down on it."

"I know," said O'Day. "So she thought Vanner was going to this Palissade place around midnight. But she didn't think she'd go?"

"No, that's what she said. She had an idea he'd be back in town tomorrow; that he might go into the office to have a talk with you. She said if he did, she wanted to be there."

O'Day grinned. "Just in case he didn't do his stuff?"

"Who knows?" said Mabel. "She looked to me to be in the sort of frame of mind that if there were going to be any show-down between you and Vanner she'd like to be around. Just so she could throw a match in the petrol tin I suppose. I don't think she likes you a bit."

O'Day said : " I've got the same idea. Is that all ? "

" It's all I've got at the moment. Isn't it enough for you ? "

" It'll do to go on with. If you see Vanner try and pump him, see ? "

She said : " I know what you mean, Terry. Don't worry. I'll earn that seventy-five. I always see my job right through to the bitter end. Only I hope it's not going to be so bitter—not for you I mean."

" We'll chance that," said O'Day. " So long, Mabel."

He hung up.

He went over to the sideboard ; mixed himself a whisky and soda. He thought that one day might be just as good as another for seeing Vanner. He thought it was rather a coincidence that Merys, who was usually so secretive about what she thought or what she was going to do, should have talked so much to Mabel Bonaventura. But maybe it wasn't. Maybe Merys felt like talking these days. Perhaps she wanted to make the misconduct story as public as possible. He shrugged his shoulders.

He took off his jacket ; threw it across a chair ; went to his bedroom. He lay on the bed in the darkness thinking about Merys Vanner, wondering what the next move in the game was going to be.

At half-past ten he got up. He helped himself to another drink ; put on an overcoat. He walked across to the garage ; got the car. It was twenty minutes to twelve when he pulled up on to the grass verge under the shelter of a hedge on the other side of Maidenhead. He locked the car ; found the deserted side road he was looking for. It was a fine night and

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half-way down the road he could see the house standing back off the roadway, looking almost ghostly in the moonlight. He went through the gate; stood in the shadow of a rhododendron bush looking at the house.

It presented that dark and bleak appearance that such places do when they are empty. There was no glimmer of light showing. O'Day thought it was a pretty odd place for a club—too far from Maidenhead to be approached except by car. He wondered on whom the proprietors depended for their livelihood. Maybe it was one of those places whose clientele drives down from London—clientele that prefers a club to be lonely.

O'Day walked up the gravel path, keeping in the shadow of the hedge that separated the side of the grounds from a lane running parallel to the house. He walked round the side of the house; came to the back of it. In two windows on the second floor, through a chink in the curtains, he could see lights. Somebody was there.

There was a flight of wooden steps approaching the porticoed back door. O'Day stood uncertainly; then he walked across the lawn at the back of the house into a little coppice beyond it. He thought that Vanner, knowing the place, would drive around to the back of the house; park his car at the bottom of the gravel path, which was wide enough to admit a vehicle. O'Day thought maybe it might be an idea to have a show-down with Vanner before he went inside.

He lighted a cigarette; stood, leaning against a tree, cupping the lighted cigarette in the palm of his hand. He'd been there a few minutes when he moved

away. His quick ears had heard a rustle in the coppice behind.

A voice said : " Hello, pal . . . ! "

O'Day side-stepped. He didn't like the sound of the voice. But his movement was too late. A fist hit him under the jaw. Caught off balance, he went down. He got to his knees and was hit again.

Another voice said almost casually : " This is where you get yours, O'Day."

He tried to get up. It was no use. He went down for the third time. Then they really got to work on him.

CHAPTER TWO

LAURETTA

I

It WAS ten o'clock when O'Day awakened. He sat up in bed and stretched. Every muscle in his body was aching. One tooth—he was thankful it was a back one—was missing, and two more were loose. He got out of bed ; went into the bathroom ; examined his face. The side of his jaw was cut—probably from a ring worn by one of the tough boys of the night before ; his left eye looked like a rainbow.

He took a shower ; rang for some coffee ; drank a glass of brandy whilst he waited for it ; considered the situation. Vanner, he thought, must have gone haywire. Whatever he thought, or didn't think, about his wife and O'Day, he might have enough sense to realise that a beating-up would do little more than put O'Day's back up. Vanner ought to know that O'Day was not likely to be deterred from any course of action merely because two thugs had caught him off balance.

What was the good of trying to beat up a man against whom you proposed to array the forces of the Divorce Court ? That alone would lose him a certain amount of sympathy. But when people got high they did all sorts of stupid things—things they regretted afterwards. Grimly, O'Day thought that before this business was

over Vanner would certainly regret the rough stuff he had arranged.

He shrugged his shoulders ; shaved ; dressed ; went into the sitting-room ; drank coffee. He thought that Merys Vanner's attitude at the Club—her conversation with Mabel Bonaventura—the evening before was peculiar. Peculiar because Merys was not the sort of baby to discuss her private affairs with a Club hostess unless there was something else to it.

He grinned wryly. Maybe there *was* something behind it. Merys would guess, after her conversation with O'Day at the hotel at Eastbourne, that he would not be likely to leave the matter where it was. She knew that he would find Vanner and have a showdown. She knew that he would probably go to the Club and ask Mabel whether she had seen Vanner. And so she had made a point of going round there ; talking to Mabel, guessing that she would telephone O'Day and tell him of Vanner's appointment at the Palissade Club at Maidenhead.

O'Day lighted his first cigarette ; began to walk about the sitting-room. He wondered how Merys knew that Vanner was going to the Palissade Club ? How she knew that he was due there at midnight. There was only one way she could find out. Vanner had told her. Why ? Were they working together ? Had Vanner laid it on through Merys for O'Day to go down to Maidenhead, and arranged for a couple of toughs to form a reception committee and beat him up. In any event, where was the sense in the process ?

He shrugged his shoulders again ; put on his hat ; walked round to the garage. On his way he stopped

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at a chemists, bought a small box of pan-cake make-up and, in the chemist's back room, sponged it round his discoloured eye.

Driving down the King's Road, O'Day concluded that it wasn't a lot of good wondering about anything. Wondering seldom got you anywhere. Facts were the things that mattered, and in order to arrive at facts you merely had to follow your nose. The process invariably brought you on to something tangible, even if it were only a brick wall !

.

At half-past one O'Day sat in the corner of the bar parlour at the Crown Inn at Alfriston. He drank a whisky and soda and kept a wary eye on the bar.

There was no one else in the room. Behind the bar—which served the Bar Parlour and—on the opposite side—the Private Bar—was a barman wearing a white jacket and a bored expression.

O'Day smoked patiently. At one forty-five a youngish one-armed man came in and told the barman to go and get his lunch. O'Day wandered over to the bar ; ordered another drink.

He said : " I'm looking for a house called Mallowfield. Can you tell me where it is ? You're the landlord, aren't you ? "

The other nodded. " Name of Filson," he said. " Mallowfield's behind Hailsham. You'll have to go back. If you're looking for someone at the house I can save you some trouble. There's no one there. Not at Mallowfield anyway. It's shut up."

O'Day said : " Thanks. Have a drink, Mr. Filson.

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You seem to know the district well. I'm interested in Mallowfield. I wanted to look over the place."

The landlord grinned. "I ought to know the place well. I was there in the war." He sighed. "Those were the days."

O'Day said: "You were there when it was a parachute agents' school? It must have been exciting."

Filson nodded; raised the stump of his arm. "I was trained at Mallowfield. I was in the Second S.A.S. I lost this fin in Normandy—made a bad drop. It was darn lucky the Jerries didn't get me. It wasn't funny lying up in a little wood for three days with a smashed elbow. Luckily our people got there first."

"Hard luck," said O'Day. "I wonder if you came across a friend of mine at the school at Mallowfield. An American—Colonel Nicholas Needham?"

Filson drew himself a pint of beer. "I knew him. He was in charge of the school. He didn't instruct. He was the administrative officer." He grinned. "We used to call him Naughty Needham," he concluded. "Here's how!" He took a swig at the pint pot.

O'Day said: "So he was a bad boy with the girls? Well . . . you know what Yankees are."

"No . . . nothing like that," said Filson. "We used to call him Naughty Needham just because he wasn't. He wasn't a bit like a Yank in that respect. He was keen on the woman who owned Mallowfield. He used to look at her like a stuck-pig. He was always hanging around; taking her places; going for walks around the grounds with her. We all thought that he was going to marry her—or try to. If she went past the

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house he used to hang out of the window watching her till she was out of sight. But he wasn't the boy for her."

O'Day said : " That sounds like Needham. He was always scared of women. Or maybe she told him that she'd rather be a sister to' him." He grinned at the landlord.

" That's what *we* thought," said Filson. " But it was easy to understand. She was some baby, I'm telling you. I've never seen anyone like her. Everybody at the school was stuck on her. She used to have some of us over to tea—or for a drink in the evening—sometimes. She had something—that one. A sort of odd quality that got under your skin. But she was one of those that nobody ever got to first base with. Nice and friendly but with a cold undercurrent. If you get me ? "

" I get you," said O'Day. " Now I understand. I had a letter from Needham the other day. He asked me to give his regards to his hostess at Mallowfield—but omitted to mention her name. But if there's no one there she must have gone."

Filson shook his head. " She's still there—but not at Mallowfield. She lives in a house called the Dower House on the other side of the estate. Her name's Deane—Mrs. Lauretta Deane. If you go over there give her my regards. Tell her that Jacky Filson asked to be remembered to her. She did me a good turn once. When I got back and applied for the licence for this pub she put in a good word for me with the owners."

" O.K. I'll give her your message." O'Day finished his drink. " And thanks for the information."

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Filson grinned. "Always glad to help," he said. His grin widened. "If you see Naughty Needham, and you want to upset his apple-cart, you can tell him that Mrs. Deane seems to have fallen for somebody at last. That'll put Naughty's nose out of joint."

"I'll let him know," said O'Day. "So she's met her fate. What's he like?"

"I don't know," said the landlord. "His name's Pavin. Comes from Paris, I believe. It's only a rumour of course—but rumours around here are usually right. This Pavin seems to spend a lot of time at the Dower House. He told a pal of mine that he expected to marry pretty soon. And everyone thinks it's going to be Mrs. Deane. Well . . . I hope to see you again."

"Surely. . . ." O'Day went out of the bar parlour.

.

It was just after two o'clock when O'Day drove along the narrow dirt road that was bounded by the Mallowfield high wall. Here and there, through an iron gate in the wall, or a five-barred gate leading to a pathway, he caught glimpses of the house, standing back nearly half a mile from the road, in the middle of undulating parkland.

A hell of a good spot for a school for parachute agents, he thought. Secluded, comfortable, well away from Hailsham, it must have been an ideal spot in which to teach its adventurous pupils their jobs. O'Day wondered where they were now. . . .

The wall curved abruptly. O'Day followed the curve. Soon he came to an iron gate. Beyond it he

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could see a curving gravel path and at the top an attractive half-timbered house.

He pulled the car into the side of the road. He got out ; lighted a cigarette ; wondered just how you opened the ball with a lady—if you were lucky enough to find her at home—in the hope that she would discuss her private affairs with you.

He grinned ; pushed open the gate ; began to walk along the path.

The place was interesting and romantic. There were coppices and bushes on each side of the pathway. The grass was thick and uncut. Large, untended rhododendron bushes grew all about the place. It presented an air of dishevelled and romantic atmosphere.

Near the house the path widened to a clearing. Here the grass was kept in some sort of order and a magnolia tree showed some signs of being occasionally tended.

O'Day threw his cigarette away ; mounted the few steps to the porch ; pulled the old-fashioned bell-handle. He heard the bell clanging on a cracked note somewhere at the back of the house.

Soon he heard footsteps ; then the door opened. A woman of about fifty, with greying hair, stood in the doorway. O'Day thought she looked like a family servant. Her face was round and pleasant.

He said : " Good afternoon. My name's O'Day—Terence O'Day. I'd like to see Mrs. Deane if she's in. I've brought a message from Colonel Needham."

" Will you wait a moment, sir ? " She went away. After a minute she came back. She said : " Mrs. Deane will see you, sir. Will you come this way ? "

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O'Day followed her into the house. The hall was well-furnished, with good antique furniture. There was a delicate suggestion of perfume about the place.

The maid pushed open a door on the other side of the hall-way. She stood to one side. She said : " Mr. O'Day."

O'Day went into the room. He stood just inside the doorway. Behind him he heard the door close quietly. He stood looking at the woman who had risen from the desk by the window on the opposite side of the room.

He thought that Filson, the landlord of The Crown at Alfriston, was an expert in understatement !

She was, O'Day thought, about thirty-five years of age. As she moved towards him he noticed the unconscious grace with which she moved. Her face was oval, with high cheekbones, violet eyes and a seductive and tremulous mouth, and was framed by curling, auburn hair.

O'Day's quick eyes took in the details of her clothes. They were expensive ; well-cut. She wore a coat and skirt of plum-coloured tweed, with a violet crepe blouse. Her shoes were of plum-coloured suede. A diamond and emerald bracelet on her slim wrist sparkled. When she spoke her voice was soft ; her enunciation perfect.

She said : " Won't you sit down, Mr. O'Day ? I'm always glad to meet a friend of Colonel Needham."

O'Day sat down in the big armchair by the fireplace. He thought that Mrs. Lauretta Deane certainly had *something*. He wasn't surprised that Needham couldn't get anywhere with her.

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He began to lie carefully. "I saw Nicky Needham just before he left England, Mrs. Deane. He said that if ever I found myself in the neighbourhood of the Dower House I was to introduce myself and give you his regards and good wishes."

"It's kind of you to have 'called," she said. She brought a box of cigarettes; offered him one. She closed the box and replaced it on the mantelpiece. O'Day had the impression that she was waiting for him to say something; that she was on her guard.

He said: "This is a most interesting old house. Don't you find it rather lonely living here, Mrs. Deane?"

She shook her head. "I like it." She smiled at him. "Sometimes one gets very tired of people. I find it quite pleasant to be alone. If I want company I can always ask my friends to come and see me."

O'Day nodded. He thought that he didn't like the way this interview was going; that it wasn't going to be easy to pump Mrs. Deane; that it looked as if she might almost be prepared for the process. He thought she was sufficiently sophisticated to make pleasant conversation if she wanted to; that she didn't want to. She was passing the buck back to him.

He lighted the cigarette. He took plenty of time over the process. He thought he might as well try forcing tactics; otherwise he would get nowhere.

He said: "Forgive the personal note, Mrs. Deane. But I know that Nicky wanted to marry you and that you turned him down. He told me so." He smiled at her. "I was surprised at Nicky proposing to anyone. I never saw him as a would-be husband. But now

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I've seen you I can understand. Even a hide-bound bachelor like Nicky would be hard put to it to resist such a very beautiful and attractive person as you are."

She sat down in the armchair on the other side of the fireplace. She put her arms along the sides of the chair. He noticed her long, slender fingers, and perfectly kept scarlet-tinted nails. She was relaxed, cool and poised. A small smile played about her mouth as she looked at him with almost incurious eyes. She emanated, he thought, an air of effortless superiority. He felt, he didn't know why, slightly angry. He thought it wasn't going to be so easy.

Her smile deepened a little. She said: "Would you like to tell me something, Mr. O'Day?" There was the smallest suggestion of quiet insolence in her voice.

He smiled. "Anything I can. What would you like to know?"

"I'd like to know if you came down here on business of your own or if the purpose of your visit here was merely to inspect the person to whom your friend and mine—Colonel Needham—proposed marriage?"

O'Day got up. He stubbed out the half-smoked cigarette in the ash-tray on the small, occasional table set in the centre of the room. When he looked at her he saw that she was still watching him with the same quiet and relaxed smile. He moved to the fireplace; stood, leaning against the mantelpiece, looking down at her.

"Actually, I plead guilty," he said. "I had an odd day today. I was doing nothing in particular and I was thinking about Needham. I thought it would be

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amusing to run down here and make the acquaintance of the lady who *didn't* want to be Mrs. Needham."

She said : " Well . . . now you've done that, haven't you ? And I hope that you've found the process as amusing as you hoped. Are you as curious about the ladies all your other friends find themselves interested in ? Do you motor about the country in these days of petrol rationing merely to inspect women to whom one of your friends has proposed ? Or am I, for some unknown reason, a unique case, Mr. O'Day ? And would you like to smoke another cigarette . . . before you go ? "

O'Day said quickly : " Actually, Mrs. Deane, I was *very* curious about you. You see Nicky is one of my oldest friends. I've known him for a long time. And I know all about him. He's an odd, quiet and rather lonely type—as you probably know. He's one of those people who are always looking for companionship and wanting to be friends with, or make a hit with, some fearfully nice woman. Nicky's a man who would give anything to be married to a charming person like you, but who, for some reason or other, will never make the grade. I knew that you and he used to meet and go for walks when he was commandant at the school here in Mallowfield, and I felt very sorry for him. I know Nicky well enough to know that if he proposed marriage to you he would be pretty hard hit at being refused. So I thought I'd come down and meet you and see. . . . "

" And see if you could do something about it ? " she queried. " Did you come down here to intercede for your friend, hoping that I might change my opinion ? "

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"Something like that," said O'Day. Vaguely he realised, almost angrily, that he had lost the lead in the conversation; that Mrs. Deane was quietly pushing him around; probably amusing herself in the process.

She smiled again.* "That was very nice and friendly of you. I expect you were so concerned for the happiness of your friend Colonel Needham that the idea occurred to you that *you* might persuade me to marry him when he himself had failed. Which seems to indicate that you are *very* fond of Colonel Needham or conceited enough to imagine that a woman who had never met you might be swayed by your opinions."

O'Day grinned at her. "Well . . . I asked for it and I've got it. But I've known stranger things come off. In my particular business you sometimes learn to believe in impossibilities."

She rose from her chair. "Before you go, Mr. O'Day, you might care to satisfy *my* curiosity on one small point. What is your business?"

O'Day thought: What the hell! He was getting nowhere. He might as well play it off the cuff.

He said: "Mrs. Deane, do me a favour and sit down and listen to me for a moment. I promise you I won't take up much of your time. First of all I'll tell you about my business. I'm a private detective, and I don't give a damn whether you marry Nicky Needham or Old King Cole. I came down here to find out as much about you as I could. Does that interest you?"

She sat down; crossed her legs. O'Day noticed her slender ankles in their perfectly fitting nylons.

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"Perhaps you'll give me a cigarette?" she said. "I'm much more interested in Mr. O'Day as a private detective who is trying to discover things about me, than as a supposed very old friend of Colonel Needham who is concerned because I wouldn't agree to marry him."

O'Day brought the cigarette box ; lighted her cigarette. He went back to the mantelpiece ; leaned against it.

"Needham left the country last Saturday," he said. "He went to Africa on some under-cover job for the U.S. Government. On the Saturday morning he tried to contact me at my office. I wasn't there. He left a long letter for me telling me all about the thing that was worrying him. He also left a sum of money to pay my expenses and retainer. He left a note at my apartment telling me he had done this in case I returned to my apartment before I went to my office. He told me in that note that he was concerned about a woman to whom he had proposed marriage and who had turned him down. When I returned to my office the letter from Needham had been accidentally destroyed. But I was able to discover that he had been down here in the War ; that he had been friendly with you. I guessed the woman in the case was you. You understand ? "

She nodded her auburn head. O'Day thought she seemed *not* very interested.

"I don't know Needham well," O'Day continued. "But he did me a good turn once, and he's paid me to work for him. So I'm working for him. He had an idea in his head that you needed looking after, in some way or another, and he thought I was the man

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to do it. So I'm trying to do it. Because when a client pays me to work for him I like seeing the job through to its logical conclusion."

"I think that is very praiseworthy, Mr. O'Day." She was still smiling. "But this seems to me to be one of those cases in which you do not have to do *any* work. I don't know what Colonel Needham meant when he said he was concerned for me. There is no reason for concern. I am very well, quite happy, and vaguely amused at all this rather stupid and dramatic story."

O'Day said : "I'm glad it amuses you."

She said nothing.

"I'll be on my way, Mrs. Deane," O'Day went on. "One of these days, when I've straightened this business out, maybe I'll come and see you again."

She got up. "There isn't any need for that," she said coolly. "There's nothing to straighten out—as you call it." She rang the bell-push by the side of the fireplace. "Thank you for coming," she continued. "I'm sure your intentions were very good."

O'Day said : "You'd be surprised ! I still think I'll be seeing you. That is, if I'm as good a detective as you are an actress. Good day, Mrs. Deane."

The maid came in. She held the door open. As O'Day went out he looked over his shoulder.

He was glad to see that the smile had gone.

O'Day sat in the lounge of the Hotel Splendide at Eastbourne ; drank tea and smoked cigarettes. He was not unhappy. One or two of the pieces in the

jaw puzzle were beginning to make sense. But only just. The main piece was missing—the piece that might co-relate some of the peculiar behaviour on the part of the characters in the odd business that was intriguing him.

His back muscles ached. His left eye, beneath its covering of make-up, was still painful. He thought about Vanner. He thought that it was unlike Vanner to employ a couple of thugs to beat up an enemy. Vanner was reasonable when sober and stupid when cock-eyed. If he'd been sober it would have been like him to deal with O'Day personally. Or would it? O'Day concluded that Vanner must have been good and drunk to get somebody to use the old-fashioned method of a beating-up.

He thought about Needham. Here was some more contradiction. Needham, who had been friendly with Mrs. Deane; who had been so keen on her that he had proposed marriage to her; who was concerned for her to the extent of paying seven hundred and fifty pounds to O'Day to look after her interests, had been strange enough to be deflected by Merys Vanner and go off and spend a night with her at the Sable Inn. O'Day thought that one certainly didn't add up. Or did it? That depended on Needham and his point of view at the time. But O'Day thought he couldn't see Needham behaving like that for the obvious reason—in spite of Merys' looks and easily adopted charm—not unless he had something else in his mind—something that made the Devonshire trip worth while. People like Needham did not go off with one woman whilst they were worrying about another.

And Lauretta Deane? O'Day was very interested

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in Mrs. Deane. The odd thing about her was that she hadn't married again. He wondered what her first husband had been like ; whether she was a widow ; whether there had been a divorce. She had everything—looks, charm, figure, a sense of dress and, apparently, money. Women with those attributes seldom stayed single—unless there was a reason. O'Day thought he would have to know a little more about the background of Mrs. Deane before he came to any definite conclusions.

In any event life was intriguing, and inclined to be amusing, he thought. Especially when he found his own life and business mixed up with Needham and Merys Vanner and Ralph Vanner and (possibly) Mrs. Deane. He thought that perhaps he didn't mind his life being mixed up with Mrs. Deane. That might be even more amusing. . . .

O'Day concluded, that even now things were beginning to straighten themselves out. They usually did—if you played them off the cuff and followed your nose. He thought that the Ralph Vanner/Merys Vanner proposition might be solved fairly easily. Once he had found Ralph Vanner ; produced the evidence of the note of instructions to the Devonshire garage written by Needham ; proved to Vanner that Needham was the man who had stayed at the Sable Inn with Merys—once he did that, even Vanner—no matter how jealous he was—would have to see reason. But at this moment O'Day thought the time was not ripe for producing these facts. Merys would be wary and try some other angle. Much better to let her believe that she was holding the trump cards. . . .

O'Day got up ; walked over to the glass-fronted

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office on the left of the entrance. Parker, the hall porter, was at his desk inside.

O'Day said : " Well . . . how's life, Parker ? "

" Not so bad, sir," said Parker. " When you were here on Saturday I hoped to have a word with you. I haven't seen you for some time. But they told me you went off suddenly on Saturday evening."

O'Day nodded. " I had to get back to town in a hurry."

Parker smiled. " I've never known you when you weren't in a hurry, Mr. O'Day. After you'd gone, Mrs. Vanner came out and asked if you'd left."

O'Day asked casually : " Did she stay long ? "

" She left on Monday afternoon," said the hall porter. " She had lunch with a gentleman—a Mr. Pavin—on Monday and she went immediately afterwards."

" Mr. Pavin . . . ? " said O'Day. " Have I met him here sometime ? The name seems to ring a bell."

" You might have," said Parker. " He's been here once or twice before. Usually comes here with Mrs. Deane."

O'Day sighed. Now things were really beginning to move. So Pavin, who was supposed to be engaged to Lauretta Deane, had had lunch with Merys Vanner on the Monday. Which explained a lot.

It explained Merys' attitude on the Saturday night. It explained why she had been so careful to tell him, at length, just what she had told Ralph Vanner about her pretended visit to the Sable Inn with O'Day. She knew that, after hearing that, O'Day would not be stupid enough to stay a night at the Splendide knowing

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that she was in the hotel. He would go so as not to give Vanner any more reasons for suspicions. And she had intended him to go. And she had checked with Parker to find out that he had gone. For an obvious reason. She had an appointment with Pavin and did not wish O'Day to know of it.

O'Day lighted a cigarette. He said easily: "I expect I've met Mr. Pavin down here sometime or other. I heard some rumour that he was engaged to Mrs. Deane. I wondered if that was true."

"Everybody thinks so," said Parker. "They've been here quite a bit—although I must say they don't look like an engaged couple."

O'Day shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know what an engaged couple looks like." He grinned at the hall porter. "All I do know is that an old friend of mine—a Colonel Needham—who used to be at Mallowfield during the war—hoped to marry Mrs. Deane."

Parker said: "I think that was just a war-time friendship, Mr. O'Day. We used to see a lot of Colonel Needham. I talked to him about those days when he was down here two or three weeks ago."

"Those were the days . . ." said O'Day. He went back to his table in the lounge; sat down; poured out some more tea. So that was that. Needham had been down two or three weeks ago. He'd been down to see Lauretta Deane. Either because he guessed she was in some sort of trouble or because she'd asked him to come down and told him about it. That was why Needham had written the letter to O'Day. He was scared for Mrs. Deane, who was now careful to deny that she was worried about anything. O'Day thought

that Mrs. Deane looked the sort of woman who might have plenty to worry about.

And Pavin? Pavin seemed to get around. Pavin who was supposed to be engaged to Mrs. Deane and who was having hurried and presumably secret meetings with Merys Vanner who, O'Day thought, had come down to Eastbourne to meet him.

He was very interested. He called the waiter; paid his bill; said a word to Parker, the hall-porter; got into his car and drove back to London.

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O'Day stopped the car at the end of Sloane Street; went into the telephone call-box; looked up Mabel Bonaventura's address. He drove round slowly. Ten minutes later he stood with his finger on the bell-push by the side of the door of her flat.

She opened the door. She said: "Well . . . well . . . who'd have thought of seeing you? Come in, Terry. What's the trouble? Or isn't there any?"

He followed her into the untidy sitting-room.

She was wearing a scarlet, silk kimono covered with gold dragons, red velvet mules with four-inch heels that she kept on her feet with difficulty, and had a cigarette stuck in an eight-inch imitation amber holder.

She went to the sideboard and produced a half-bottle of whisky, two glasses and a syphon.

She said: "You're a proper slave-driver, aren't you, Terry? I s'pose you've come to find out if I've got my hooks into Vanner yet. Well, I haven't. I haven't seen the boy and nobody else seems to know

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where he is. Maybe he's still hitting the high spots." She mixed the drinks ; brought O'Day's glass over to him.

He asked : " D'you think that Merys knows where he is ? "

She shrugged her shoulders. " Search me ! I don't know what the hell anybody's playing at—except maybe you." She grinned amiably. " Maybe Ralph's chucked himself offa the end of the pier some place," she went on. " That'd make it easier for everybody . . . especially you. Except that you'd have to fight Merys off all the time ! "

O'Day said : " Tell me about Merys. What happened when you saw her at the Club yesterday evening ? "

" You never know with Merys. She's a smart one, that one. She never even lets her left hand know what her *left* hand's doing—let alone the right one." Mabel took a large gulp at her whisky and soda.

She went on : " What she has to come into the Club for at the time she did, I wouldn't know. She might have known that nobody would be there—nobody who mattered to her anyway. She came in, and she came straight to the hostesses' room. I was there and nobody else. She sat down and gave me a cigarette and began to talk about Vanner. She said she was worried to death about him."

O'Day grinned. " It must be the first time she's worried about anything or anyone."

She nodded. " That's what I thought. It looked to me like she was putting on an act. Playing a line for somebody's benefit. Maybe it was for me. Maybe

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she thought that you mighta been around pumping me about where Vanner was. Maybe she thought I mighta been able to tell *her* something."

"What else?" O'Day asked.

"Well . . ." Mabel continued, "she said she was worried about Vanner. She said she didn't know what he was at, and that he was in the sort of frame of mind when he might do anything—or anybody."

"What did you say?"

"I said I didn't know why the hell she didn't get hold of the guy and try and talk some sense into him. I said I thought he was a big mug and his own worst enemy. I asked her if she knew where he was. She said she didn't know, but that she knew he had an appointment at twelve o'clock last night at the Palisade Club—like I told you on the telephone. So I asked her why she didn't go down there and talk sense to him there. She said no; she wasn't going to do that. First of all he'd be goddam angry with her for musclin' in on his business and secondly she didn't want to talk to him at *any* Club. She wanted to see him in private."

O'Day finished his drink. "Tell me something, Mabel. When you were talking to me on the telephone yesterday you said that Merys seemed excited—'excited but trying to sit down on it.' What did you mean by that one?"

She shrugged her shoulders; pushed a fresh cigarette into her long holder; lighted it.

"She was sort of different—if you know what I mean. Usually, Merys Vanner's pretty cool. She not only knows all the answers; she's usually one jump ahead of the question. But she wasn't like that

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yesterday. She looked to me as if she'd had a drink, and she was excited and yet trying to keep cool at the same time. She seemed to me as if she'd heard something or seen something that had knocked her for a loop ; as if she was trying to keep quiet and think things out and was too excited to do it."

O'Day said : " Actually, all she did was to let you know that Vanner was going to be at the Palissade Club round about midnight. I think you're right, Mabel. I think that the idea was that she'd guessed I'd asked you if you'd seen Vanner. Merys thought that you'd tell me he'd be at the Palissade at twelve. Maybe she wanted me to be there."

She said : " Search me. . . . But p'raps you're right. That looks like the only good reason she mighta had. She would know that I wouldn't give a tinker's cuss where Vanner was—or wasn't."

She took out a powder compact from the pocket of her dressing-gown ; walked over to the mirror ; began to powder her nose. " She stopped suddenly in the process ; turned towards O'Day.

" Look, Terry . . . you take a tip from little Mabel and watch your step. That Merys is gunning for you—but *good*. She doesn't like you a bit—not one little thing about you. She's out for your blood and if you're not goddam careful she's going to have it. Didn't they ever tell you that one about ' Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned ' ? "

O'Day grinned. " I heard that when I was at school." He got up. " I'll be seeing you, Mabel. Watch out for Vanner and if you find him do your stuff."

" O.K.," said Mabel. " If I find him I will, and

you watch your step, Terry . . . like I said. I'll be seeing you soon—and all in one piece *I hope*."

O'Day went back to his apartment ; mixed himself a dry Martini ; sat in the big chair with his long legs draped over the arm and thought about Mrs. Deane. He thought that Mrs. Deane might be a very tough nut to crack. She gave the impression that she wasn't afraid of anything and, if she was, she didn't intend to talk about it. O'Day wondered what Needham had in the back of his mind ; what he'd written in the long letter that Vanner, out of spite, had taken the trouble to destroy. Needham was no fool. He was not the sort of person to spend good money on something that wasn't worth while. And Needham had been a friend of Mrs. Deane's. O'Day thought that she was concealing something—some matter about which she had talked with Needham. Probably she'd made him promise not to divulge what she had told him. Maybe Needham, thinking the thing over, studying its implications at leisure, had concluded that the danger to her was serious enough for him to break his promise. He could feel justified in that process because he would reason that he was breaking his word for *her* good.

O'Day wondered why he spent so much time thinking about Mrs. Deane. He considered the possibility of her being blackmailed. Why not ? Lots of women were blackmailed and these women were usually attractive women. And Mrs. Deane was certainly attractive—very attractive. O'Day wondered vaguely why it was that women with legs like drain-pipes and faces like the backs of hansom cabs seldom found themselves troubled by the attentions of blackmailers.

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He got up ; walked across to the shaker on the side-board ; poured another cocktail. The telephone bell rang.

O'Day put down the shaker ; picked up the telephone. It was Nellie Trundle.

She said : " I'm glâd you're back, Mr. O'Day. I've been trying to get you all the afternoon."

" Well . . . you've got me. What's happened, Nellie ? "

" Mr. Vanner came through about four o'clock. He asked me to get in touch with you. He said it was necessary that he met you today—absolutely necessary—for your sake as much as his. He suggests that you meet him in the office tonight at ten o'clock."

O'Day grinned. He thought that would suit him very well. Now, apparently, things *were* going to happen. Possibly, thought O'Day, Vanner, having got over his jag, was rather sorry about the beating-up. Maybe he thought it better to get down to hard tacks and have a show-down.

He said : " O.K. Anything else ? "

" Yes," said Miss Trundle. " Mr. Vanner asked me to tell you that his wife would be present at this interview. He said the time had come for a show-down. He seemed very excited."

" Did he ask you to ring him back ? " said O'Day.

" No. That was all he said. He took it for granted that you'd be there."

O'Day said : " He was right. O.K., Nellie. Where are you speaking from ? "

" From home. Nothing much happened in the office today."

" Good," said O'Day. " I'll probably be in at ten

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o'clock tomorrow morning. Good night, Nellie." He hung up.

He went back to the sideboard ; picked up the glass of Martini ; stood leaning against the sideboard, sipping it. He thought the meeting in the office at ten o'clock might be amusing. He hoped Vanner would be sober. He thought he would be. Vanner, thought O'Day, had had it. He'd made his enquiries at the Sable Inn and received some sort of verification of Merys Vanner's story. O'Day thought, with a cynical grin, that it was going to be very amusing when he—O'Day—produced Needham's note of instructions about the motor-car to the local garage, and the letter that Needham had left at O'Day's apartment. He wondered what Vanner was going to say when he realised that the handwriting was identical. He wondered what he was going to say when O'Day proved to him that it was Needham who'd stayed at the Sable Inn with his wife.

He finished the cocktail ; undressed ; bathed ; lay down on his bed. He lay there in the darkness wondering about this and that. But most of the time he found his mind straying to Mrs. Lauretta Deane who, he thought, was so much more interesting than anyone else.

At half-past nine he got up ; dressed ; drove to the office. He arrived there a few minutes after ten. He opened the front door ; went up the stairs, along the passage-way. There was no light showing through the glass door of O'Day Investigations. So Vanner and Merys had not arrived. O'Day unlocked the door ; went in.

The day's mail was in Nellie Trundle's basket on

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her desk. O'Day went into his own room ; switched on the light. He sat in his big desk chair ; put his feet on the desk. He wondered how long Vanner and his wife would be.

At twenty to eleven he was still wondering. He got up ; began to walk about the office. He wondered if Ralph Vanner had changed his mind ; if he had concluded that the interview which had seemed so important was not so important. O'Day put on his hat. He was walking through the outer office when the telephone bell rang. He took the call on Miss Trundle's desk. It was Merys Vanner.

She said quietly : " Good evening, Terry. I hope you're well. Actually, I expect you're as well as you can be."

O'Day asked : " What do you mean by that, Merys ? "

She said : " It looks as if Ralph got somebody to take care of you last night. I wonder how you liked it."

" As much as anyone likes being beaten up. I thought Ralph had made the appointment tonight to apologise. I thought maybe he'd arranged that beating-up when he was cock-eyed ; that now he'd thought better of it."

" I don't think he was cock-eyed, Terry. I think he felt like that, that's all."

" O.K.," said O'Day. " Do we have to go on talking about that ? Is that what you rang up for ? And where is Ralph ? I want to talk to that bird."

" Believe it or not, he wants to talk to you, but some urgent business turned up and he couldn't get to the office. He said he'd be glad if you'd go down to the

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Palissade Club tonight. He's going to be there without fail at twelve o'clock."

"Is he? What do I go down there for—to get another good hiding?"

She said: "You needn't worry about that, Terry. That was just on the side. Ralph knew he hadn't a chance against you if he tried it personally. He was very bad-tempered then, and I think in his heart he's rather sorry he pulled that one on you. But now he wants to talk and I think it's going to be a very good thing for us all if you meet and get this thing settled one way or another."

O'Day said: "I think so too. All right, Merys. I'll be there. And tell Ralph I expect *him* to be there."

She said: "You needn't bother, Terry. He'll be there. Well, I hope it keeps fine for you. Good night, my Sweet. I hope you and Ralph have a really good heart-to-heart talk." He heard her laugh. "I hope it'll do both of you a lot of good," she concluded. He heard her put the receiver back on its hook.

He lighted a cigarette. He thought this business of Ralph and Merys Vanner was very odd and peculiar. The more it went on the more involved it became.

He began to walk about the room, inhaling cigarette smoke; thinking about all the things that had happened since last Saturday. Life depended on all sorts of small things. If he hadn't met Jennings at Plumpton Races; if Jennings hadn't told him that Merys Vanner might be at Eastbourne; if . . .

The idea came out of the blue. He threw his cigarette stub into the fireplace; lighted another.

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The idea was so peculiar it fascinated him. *If* it was true it altered the whole set-up. But it was a hell of a big 'if.'

He walked across to the telephone; called Nellie Trundle's home number. She came on the line at once.

O'Day said: "Listen, Nellie . . . I want you to take your mind back to last Saturday. I want you to go through everything that happened from the time that you arrived at the office. Don't leave anything out. Not the smallest detail. Understand?"

She said: "Yes . . . I'll try and get it quite straight and leave nothing out." She paused for a moment; then went on: "I got to the office at nine o'clock. I opened the mail and thought that there wasn't anything very important. Then I wondered if you'd show up; or if Mr. Vanner would appear. Nothing happened for about an hour—or something like that—and then Mrs. Vanner rang up."

She thought for a moment: "I think it was about ten-thirty when Colonel Needham arrived at the office. He must have been talking to me for about ten minutes. I think it was I who suggested that he might write a note and leave it for you. I gave him a writing pad and a small envelope and put him into the waiting-room to write his note. He called out to me that he wanted a large, quarto-sized, thick envelope. So I gave him one. He was in the waiting-room for quite a while. Then he came out with the envelope already sealed. It was very bulky—so much so that I thought there must be some enclosures in it. He gave me the envelope and asked if he could have your private address and telephone number just in case he was able

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to get in touch with you before he left the country. I gave it to him and he went."

O'Day asked: "What happened then?"

"I left the envelope on my desk," she answered. "Then I went out and had some coffee and a sandwich. I thought I'd go back before one o'clock in case you'd come in. I went back to the office after I'd had my coffee, took the envelope from my desk and put it in the whisky drawer in your desk and locked the drawer. I knew that if you came into the office you'd look there to see if I'd left a note for you."

O'Day asked: "When you went back to the office after your coffee, and picked up the envelope from your desk, did you look at it?"

"No, I didn't. Why should I? Surely you don't think, Mr. O'Day, that——"

"I don't think anything. O.K., Nellie. That's all. I'll probably be in the office tomorrow some time. Good night."

He hung up the receiver. He stood by the telephone table with the cigarette—which had gone out—hanging from the corner of his mouth.

He began to grin. It would be damned funny, he thought, if his idea was right.

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O'Day stopped the car a hundred yards down the road from the Palissade Club. He leaned back in the driving seat, smoked a cigarette and considered the implications of the situation between Nicholas Needham and Mrs. Deane, and the situation between

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Merys and Ralph Vanner and himself. It seemed to him that for some reason—remote at the moment—there was a point where the two affairs touched. O'Day recapitulated the points which interested him.

Needham had arrived in England about five weeks ago. Between three and four weeks ago he had been at the Sable Inn near Totnes with Merys Vanner. At just about the same time he had paid a visit to Mrs. Lauretta Deane whom he had met in the war; to whom he had proposed marriage and been turned down. For some reason or other he was concerned for the welfare or safety of Mrs. Deane and as a result decided to enlist the services of O'Day.

It seemed to O'Day, sitting in the darkness, smoking, that there might be some connection between Needham's worry about Mrs. Deane and the fact that she was now engaged to a man named Pavin who lived, or had been recently, in France. Maybe, thought O'Day, Needham had only heard of her engagement three weeks before. Maybe he was jealous of Pavin and wanted O'Day to make enquiries about him. But O'Day didn't believe that. Needham was not the sort of man to cry over spilt milk. If he was worried about Pavin he must have something to worry about. Mere jealousy would not bother him that much—or would it?

He brought his mind back to his own affairs. To the situation which existed between himself and Merys Vanner and Ralph Vanner. Obviously, at first glance, there could be no connection between the two things. But first glances could be wrong too. There was one definite connection and that was the fact that Needham had stayed at the Sable Inn with

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Merys. At that point and that point only the two stories impinged on each other.

O'Day thought that if he knew what had happened there ; why the visit had become necessary and whose idea it was ; then the rest would be easy.

He restarted the car ; 'drovê slowly on. He looked over the front of the Palissade Club as he passed down the main road. As on the previous visit the place was in darkness with no sign of life about it. He stopped the car on the left of the road some distance from the Palissade side turning ; locked it ; walked slowly back ; turned into the side road.

He thought it rather odd that Merys, when telephoning him to make the appointment, had not suggested where he was to go when he arrived. Whether he was to go to the back of the house, to the side entrance or the front.

And it was not like Merys to be so vague.

O'Day tried the gate in the side wall which he had noticed the night before. It was unlocked. He went through ; found himself on the right-hand side of the lawn behind the house, opposite the coppice in which he had been beaten up. From where he stood he could see the short flight of wooden steps leading up to the back entrance of the club. There was no light in any window at the back of the place.

O'Day stood there in the shadow. He had a vague feeling of discomfort. 'The scene was too much a repetition of the night before. He stood there for a few minutes ; then turned and, keeping in the shadow of the wall, walked round the side of the house to the front entrance. He walked along the gravel path ; went up the steps to the front door. It was unlocked.

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He went inside ; closed the door behind him. He struck a match ; found a light switch ; turned it on. He stood in a fair-sized hallway with three doors on the right of it, one door on the left and in front of him a wide, curving flight of stairs leading to the upper regions. On the right of the stairs was a passageway which seemed to lead towards the back of the house.

O'Day switched off the light ; opened the door to his left. Inside, the room was dark, the curtains drawn. He groped for a light switch ; switched on the light. The room was large, well-furnished and along the whole length of the right-hand side was a bar, the shelves behind it well-stocked with bottles. The smell of tobacco smoke still hung on the air.

O'Day walked over to the bar ; stood leaning on it, looking at the framed set of the Palissade Club's rules that hung on the wall behind it. Apparently, the place closed at half-past ten. The whole thing was very mysterious. Why it was necessary for Vanner to have meetings at a deserted club-house in the country he didn't know. He wondered if Vanner did.

The telephone at the end of the bar rang. O'Day stood looking at the instrument. For a moment he was inclined to let it ring ; then he picked up the receiver.

He said : " Hello. . . . "

Merys' voice came on the line. " So you're there, Terry ? I'm glad. I rang ten minutes ago and there was no answer. "

O'Day said : " I thought you were to be present at this interview. "

" Did you ? " Her voice was sarcastic. " Well, I

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decided that I wouldn't. I thought it would be much nicer to be in London whilst you and Ralph said what you had to say to each other."

"I'm sorry you thought that. I wanted you to be present. Maybe you'd have been surprised. Maybe, however, fate has ruled otherwise. Look, where is Vanner? I've just arrived at this place and it's empty. The front door was open. As far as I can see there's nobody here."

She said: "But there will be. Ralph may be a little late, but he'll be there. Perhaps he'll go in by the back entrance. The proprietor doesn't like people going in the front way after the club's closed."

"I see . . ." said O'Day. "So that's why he leaves the front door unlocked?"

She said: "Good night, Terry." He heard the receiver click on abruptly.

He lighted a cigarette. He wondered what the hell Merys was playing at. She was doing the strangest things, but Merys did nothing except for a reason. He switched off the light; closed the door; went out of the front door.

He did not retrace his steps round the side of the house. Instead he went down the gravel path, through the front entrance gates. He walked down the side lane until he came to the door in the wall. He went through.

Someone was in the back of the house. Now the window on the right-hand side of the back entrance showed a light. The blinds were down but through one side where the curtain had been drawn apart O'Day could see that the lights in the room were on. So Vanner had arrived!

O'Day threw away his cigarette. He walked across the lawn, up the wooden steps ; pushed the door open. There was a light on in the small hall and the door of the room on the right was ajar. He pushed open the door ; stepped into the room. Vanner had arrived all right.

O'Day stood looking at the scene before him. Vanner was seated at the head of a square table in the middle of the room. His body was slumped forward on the table, his head lying grotesquely sideways on his arm. O'Day walked across and looked at him. The back of the head had been smashed in. It was a bad wound. The instrument used had been very heavy. O'Day thought that someone else must have been *very* angry with Ralph Vanner.

He put his fingers on the dead man's hand ; realised that Vanner had not been dead for long. But he had been lying there when O'Day had first looked at the back of the house when there was *no* light on. So, since then, whilst he had been talking to Merys Vanner on the telephone, somebody had switched on the light and gone.

O'Day shrugged his shoulders. He stood there, looking at Vanner—Vanner who had been stupid, weak and aggressive but who, underneath, had not been too bad at times.

He turned away ; went through the open doorway ; pulled the door shut after him with the toe of his shoe. He walked down the passage-way that led to the front of the house. He put on the electric light switches as he came to them. In the front hall he turned ; walked up the stairs. He went into a dozen rooms above—bathrooms, billiard room, another bar, an office of

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sorts—all sorts and conditions of rooms, each one with the curtains carefully drawn and the doors unlocked.

He walked round each room, scanning it with careful eyes, looking for he did not know what, but hoping to find it. There was nothing. He went back down the stairs along the passage-way to the back of the house. He pushed open the door of the room where Vanner was ; looked carefully about the place. Something under the table caught his eye. He picked it up ; looked at it. It was a bracelet—a very good bracelet—a bracelet of diamonds and emeralds.

He went out of the room ; through the small hall. When he closed the outside back door he wiped his fingerprints off it with a handkerchief. He went down the wooden steps through the side door into the lane. He walked to where he'd left his car ; got in ; reversed ; began to drive towards London.

Two miles from the Palissade Club, at an intersection in the road, he stopped the car. He walked across to the opposite corner ; went into the telephone booth. He put his handkerchief over the mouthpiece ; dialled 999.

When somebody answered O'Day said : " There's a club called the Palissade about a mile outside Maidenhead. A man's been murdered there. He's in the ground floor back room."

The officer asked politely : " Who is that talking please ? "

O'Day said : " Wouldn't you like to know ? "

He hung up ; went out of the call box. He got into his car ; drove back to London.

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II

It was ten o'clock when O'Day woke up. He got out of bed ; rang for coffee ; bathed ; dressed. When his breakfast arrived he drank two cups of coffee ; ate a piece of toast. Then he walked round to the garage ; got out the car.

When he went into the office, Nellie Trundle said : " Good morning, Mr. O'Day. There's very little mail."

" Any 'phone calls ? " asked O'Day.

" Yes . . . Mrs. Vanner came through about ten minutes ago. She asked for you. I said you weren't here."

O'Day said : " What's she going to do ? "

" She said she'd ring again in half an hour's time."

" She's going to be unlucky. I shan't be here."

" I see . . ." said Miss Trundle. " The sign-writer's coming round to do the door this morning, Mr. O'Day. I said you wanted the title to be just *O'Day Investigations*."

He grinned at her. " That is most appropriate. Vanner's no longer with us."

She raised her eyebrows. " What do you mean, Mr. O'Day ? "

" You'll find out soon enough," said O'Day. " Listen, Nellie, I'm going down to the country, but I'll be back at my apartment this evening some time. I think you'll find that the police will want to know where I am."

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She looked worried. "Mr. O'Day, I hope nothing's happened—nothing serious I mean."

He said: "It has. Somebody's killed Vanner. Somebody who must have been very angry with him. I have an idea they might try to elect me for it."

"Good God, Mr. O'Day . . . ! Surely——"

He said: "However much I disliked Vanner I should never have wanted to kill him, but circumstantial evidence can be very good, Nellie, and in this case it's almost too good to be true. Maybe I'll see you tomorrow morning."

"What am I to tell Mrs. Vanner when she rings through?" asked Miss Trundle.

"Tell her to leave her telephone number and her address. When you've got them ring through to the hall-porter at my apartment block and give them to him."

"Very well, Mr. O'Day."

He went out of the office.

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At twelve o'clock O'Day went into the upstairs bar at the Silver Grill in Albemarle Street. He ordered a tongue salad; a large whisky and soda. He sat there eating and drinking, reading the report of Vanner's death in the mid-day edition of *The Evening News*. He thought it looked very interesting in print. He noted with approval that owing to certain indications the Chief Constable of Berkshire had already been in conference with Scotland Yard, who were collaborating on the case. O'Day thought he liked that. Somehow Scotland Yard seemed nearer home.

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He finished his lunch ; got into the car. He thought the time had arrived when he might be going to take up a definite attitude of mind towards Mrs. Lauretta Deane. Then he thought of something else.

He drove to his garage off Sloane Square ; saw the foreman in charge. He said : " George, I think my carburettor's not very good. You'll have to take it down. But I'm in a hurry. I can't wait. Can you hire me a car ? "

George produced a sixteen horse-power Rover. O'Day got into it ; drove away. He was glad he'd remembered about the car. He thought that it was more than likely that most policemen—especially in the country districts—would be on the look-out for his own Jaguar.

Two hundred and fifty yards on the other side of Chelsea Bridge he stopped the car ; went into a call box. He spoke to ' Directory ' ; got the telephone number of the Dower House at Mallowfield. He called through. The maid's voice answered.

O'Day said : " Good afternoon. This is Mr. O'Day. I'd like to speak to Mrs. Deane, and I'd like you to tell her that I consider the matter to be urgent."

The voice asked him to hold on. He waited, leaning up against the side of the call box.

Her voice came on the line.

O'Day said : " Good afternoon, Mrs. Deane. I want to see you rather particularly." He looked at his wrist-watch. " It's half-past twelve. That means, allowing time for your lunch, you might like to see me about three o'clock. Do you think you would ? "

" Why should I, Mr. O'Day ? Can you tell me of

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any reason why I should want to see you? Our conversation when you were here last was pleasant, but not very intriguing or amusing."

O'Day grinned. "That's what I thought. I thought it might be a rather good idea if we had a more intriguing and amusing conversation this afternoon. In fact," he added, "I can promise you it will be much more intriguing if not so amusing."

She said coolly: "Are you trying to be rude?"

"Why should I, Mrs. Deane? I never try to be. In any event, I don't even want to be rude to you. I want to ask you some questions and I think you're going to try to answer them truthfully."

He heard her laugh—a casual, disinterested laugh.

Then she said: "Mr. O'Day, there are moments when I find you very refreshing. Will you tell me why I should want to see you, why I should allow myself to be questioned and why I should bother as to the truthfulness or not of my replies?"

"I'll give you one very good, all-embracing reason. Actually, I don't mind whether you talk or whether you don't, but I want to do you a favour. I think I'd like to return your bracelet to you."

There was a silence; then she said: "Exactly what do you mean?"

"I'll tell you. When I saw you yesterday I was rather taken by your bracelet. I have an eye for stones. I very often work for Insurance Company assessors. You get to learn a certain amount about precious stones. Well, I liked yours. I especially admired the emerald and diamond bracelet you were wearing on your left wrist. It's by Cartier, and they never duplicate a bracelet of that quality. So the one I have is

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yours. Don't you think you'd like to have it back—or shall I report its loss to the police ? ”

There was another pause ; then she said in the same cool, rather detached voice : “ You said about three o'clock, didn't you ? ”

He said : “ I'll be with you at three.”

At this moment an introduction to Chief Detective-Inspector John Henry Dougal becomes necessary. Detective-Inspector Dougal had been a police officer for twenty-seven years and, even if he didn't look as if he liked his work, he enjoyed it very much. It seemed to most people with whom he came in contact that Mr. Dougal did not like anything. His face was long, lugubrious and with an air of solemnity occasionally lightened by a very attractive smile. Very occasionally. He looked like anything else but a police officer. He was meticulous in his dress and invariably wore a dark blue, double-breasted lounge suit with a very faint pattern. His shirt and stiff double collar were always immaculate, his tie usually a quiet grey blue. He wore a Homburg hat, often wore gloves and, believe it or not, invariably carried a perfectly rolled umbrella with a malacca crook—a process which caused his colleagues a great deal of amusement.

Ever since the days when Dougal had walked a beat in London he had found that the business of being interested in human nature was much more amusing than being interested in the processes of the law—especially such processes as came in the way of a police constable. Perhaps it was for this reason that he had

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made up his mind to cease being a constable as soon as possible. Three months after his four years on the streets he had gone to a local C.I.D. section ; thence to Scotland Yard.

His interest in most cases that came his way was one of personalities. Dougal had often remarked that he was much more interested in the people who committed the crimes than in the crimes themselves ; that if you were sufficiently interested in people you sometimes put your finger on the one you wanted.

At half-past two the detective constable who ' carried the bag ' for Dougal came into his office. Dougal was busily engaged in working out *The Times* crossword puzzle. He raised an iron-grey eyebrow.

He said : " Well . . . ? "

The detective constable, whose name was Smith, said : " The Assistant Commissioner would like to see you, sir." He smiled. " You thought he would, didn't you ? "

Dougal said with the slightest trace of a Scottish accent :

" I hoped he would, laddie." He got up.

The Assistant Commissioner was smoking a short pipe. He pushed a folder to the other side of his desk ; indicated it with a long forefinger.

He said : " Sit down, Dougal. I think this one belongs to you."

Dougal said : " I'm very glad, sir. It's a long time since anything interesting came my way. I hope it's Maidenhead."

The Assistant Commissioner nodded. He said : " The dead man Vanner had been having some sort of trouble with his wife. He was a partner in a firm of

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private investigators—O'Day & Vanner. They're a pretty high-class firm in a way. They work for the International & General. Most of the stuff from the Assessors Department goes to them. They've done some other quite good work too. The firm was started by Terence O'Day. Vanner joined him about eighteen months ago."

Dougal nodded.

The Assistant Commissioner pushed a box of cigarettes across the table. "Help yourself." He went on: "Apparently there's been some trouble between Vanner and O'Day about Vanner's wife—a very good-looking woman—Merys Vanner. I've been talking to the head of the Assessors' Department at the International & General this morning. He tells me that Vanner's been hitting the high spots during the last three or four days because he was very upset. Apparently he was upset because he'd heard that his partner O'Day had spent a night with Mrs. Vanner at an hotel in Devonshire. This news quite naturally upset him and he went out on a jag. It seems he'd been drunk for days.

"I don't know why he went to this Palissade Club at Maidenhead, but it's established that O'Day was there last night; that he had an appointment with Vanner. Apparently O'Day had been there to see Vanner the night before. Whether they quarrelled then or whether Vanner put some proposition about his wife up to O'Day, I don't know. There're lots of rumours about that. The main one is that Vanner had said some days before that he was going to divorce his wife and cite O'Day as the co-respondent. You'll have to check on that. The point is that it seems

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fairly certain that O'Day was there last night. The doctor says Vanner was killed at about twelve o'clock. Unfortunately, there was an electric fire on in the room, and the doctor can't get any nearer than that."

Dougal asked : " Is that all, sir ? "

The Assistant Commissioner nodded. " Everything we have up to the moment is in the folder."

Dougal got up. He picked up the folder. He said : " I'd better talk to O'Day. That's the obvious thing."

" Yes, you'd better do that. His private address is in the folder. His office address is in Long Acre."

Dougal said : " I'll try and interview him today, sir. Would you like me to see you about it in the morning ? "

" That's as you like," said the other. " If you want to see me, all right."

Dougall said : " Just one question, sir. Do we know anything about O'Day ? "

The Commissioner shook his head. " Nothing except that he seems quite an intelligent type of man. He has a very good record as an investigator. He's Irish and he has the acute sense of that race. He's done some very good work for the Insurance Companies. They seem to think he's quite a boy. "

Dougal said : " I see." He went to the door. " If I see him today, sir, I might ring you through for an appointment to talk tomorrow. But you're not asking me to see you ? "

The Assistant Commissioner said : " I'm asking you to do what you like about it." He smiled. " In any event," he concluded, " you usually do."

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Dougal smiled a little grimly ; went out ; closed the door very quietly behind him.

At a quarter past three O'Day stopped his car on the wide gravel space before the Dower House. He threw his cigarette into a rhododendron bush ; walked up the steps ; pulled the bell handle. The clanging of the bell inside the house intrigued him. He thought even that had an air of romance about it. He thought that there was plenty of romance about the Dower House and even more about Mrs. Lauretta Deane.

She opened the door ; stood in the hallway, the afternoon sunlight falling on her. O'Day thought her clothes were perfect.

She wore a jade green, tailored frock ; nigger brown suede shoes. A gold leaf clip was at her neck. There were two plain gold bangles on her left wrist. O'Day thought jade green was a charming colour against the auburn of her hair.

She smiled at him, still the same cool, detached smile. She said : " Would you like to come in ? "

He followed her into the hall ; closed the front door for her. She went into the room where she'd received him the day before. She walked over to the window ; looked out of it for a moment ; then turned.

" Well . . . Mr. O'Day ? What is it ? "

O'Day said : " Do you mind if I smoke ? " He took out his cigarette case ; lighted a cigarette. He went on : " Mrs. Deane, let you and me get one or two points straight. I told you yesterday who I was ;

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what I was doing ; what my interest in you was. I told you that Nicky Needham had an idea in his head that he ought to be concerned for you ; that he left me some money to try to look after you. I told you that when people paid me to work for them I work for them. That was my only interest up till yesterday, but now I have another interest."

He put his hand into his left-hand jacket pocket ; produced the bracelet. He held it suspended over two fingers of his left hand. The stones sparkled in the afternoon sunlight coming through the window.

O'Day said : " It's a hell of a bracelet, isn't it ? Fine stones, beautifully set in a most original platinum setting. It's worth a lot of money and it's *your* bracelet."

She said nothing.

O'Day went on : " The point is this. Last night I had an appointment with my partner Vanner. I had an appointment with him at some house—it calls itself a club—near Maidenhead. When I got there the place was empty, but before I found Vanner I answered a telephone call. So one person at least knows that I was there"—he smiled at her—" which puts me in rather a spot.

" I wandered round this place till I found Vanner. He was sitting at a table in a back room. He was dead. Somebody had smashed his head in. Your bracelet was on the floor underneath the table—a fact which is very important to me."

She asked : " Why, Mr. O'Day ? " Now her voice was serious, her eyes grave. " Would you like to sit down ? "

" Thanks." O'Day sat down in the armchair on

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the right of the fire. She seated herself in the chair opposite. He went on : " This bracelet might be very important to me—you understand that—if I *have* to mention it."

She asked : " Will you tell me why ? "

O'Day nodded. " They've found Vanner. The story's in the midday edition of *The Evening News*. They're going to make enquiries about it. They're going to find out that there's been trouble between Vanner and myself lately. Then they'll get around talking to his nearest friends and relations. They'll talk to his wife." He smiled ruefully. " I don't think she's particularly fond of me. She was the person who telephoned me last night just before I found him. I think she's going to tell them that Vanner and I had a hell of a row about her. And they're going to believe that I lost my temper and killed him."

He looked at her half whimsically. " Do you blame them ? If I were a policeman looking for a murderer I'd look for the easiest way of finding him. I think they're going to look for me. They might even believe that I did it." He shrugged his shoulders. " I shall have to talk them out of that belief. But the point is they probably believe that nobody else saw Vanner—nobody but me I mean—last night. It would be very easy for me to produce this bracelet ; to tell them that I found it on the floor ; to suggest that this bracelet might have been the cause of all the trouble. It's valuable, isn't it ? I should say it's worth between ten and fifteen thousand pounds, if not more. They're very big, first-class, selected stones—lovely stones. So if I tell 'em that, they're going to want to know whose bracelet it is, aren't they ? Is it insured ? "

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She nodded.

"Then they'll find out whose it is, won't they? They'll find it's yours. They'll want to know when you lost it; whether you've reported the loss. They'll want to know all sorts of things. Well, you hadn't lost it yesterday. You were wearing it yesterday afternoon and somehow, between the time I left you and the time I saw Vanner, that bracelet had got from Mallowfield, Sussex, to a back room in the Palissade Club near Maidenhead. And it didn't walk!"

She said: "Well, Mr. O'Day . . . ?"

"It isn't well. Would you like to talk to me about the bracelet?"

There was a silence for a moment; then she said: "Supposing I don't want to?"

"You don't *have* to," said O'Day. "I've no authority or power to make you talk. I'm merely returning the bracelet to you."

He got up; walked across to her; dropped it in her lap. "You see the spot I'm in if you don't talk. If they try to pin this thing on me and," he added, "they've got some excellent circumstantial evidence, you know, and it's no good saying that it is *only* circumstantial evidence. Plenty of people have been hanged on circumstantial evidence before now. The point is if I produced the story of that bracelet, or if I—instead of giving the bracelet back to you—had kept it, I'd draw a red herring across this circumstantial evidence. The police would be forced to concentrate on someone else. They'd know that at least somebody else *was* there and if they knew that somebody else *was* there they wouldn't be quite so keen on trying to pin this thing on me. You understand that?"

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She said : " I understand. Are you suggesting that I was at this club last night ? "

" I'm not suggesting anything. All I'm saying is that I'm in a spot, and you might like to tell me something that would help me." He smiled at her. " I wanted to help you, you know, even if I was paid for it. Would you like to return the compliment ? "

She sat back in the chair. He noted with admiration that she was still quite relaxed.

She said : " I don't know what I want to do, Mr. O'Day. I don't know. I think I shall have to consider it."

" Well, that's that," said O'Day. " There's your bracelet, Mrs. Deane, and I'm very glad to have been able to return it to you." He took out his note-case ; extracted a card. " There's my address—my private address—and my 'phone number. Maybe you might feel like talking to me some time. If you do you'll know where to find me."

He walked to the door.

She got up. She said quickly : " Mr. O'Day . . . why have you returned the bracelet if it's going to be of such use to you ? Why don't you keep it ? "

" If I'd any sense I ought to, but I'm thinking of two things. I'm thinking of Nicky Needham, for whom I'm working whether he's here or not. Nicky paid me seven hundred and fifty pounds to keep an eye on you because he was afraid for you—why I don't know. I don't think I'd be doing a hell of a good job if I turned this bracelet in to the police at this moment in order to get myself out of what looks like a jam. That's one reason."

She asked : " And the other ? "

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O'Day turned. "I don't know, but I'm beginning to understand Needham's point of view. I think you're a hell of a woman. I think I rather go for you. I think that was the real idea why I brought the bracelet back—that, and, because I hoped you might do some talking; that you might clear up all sorts of points I want cleared up." He shrugged his shoulders. "If you don't want to talk, you won't. You will some time."

"Why, Mr. O'Day?"

He grinned at her. "I hope that the tougher it gets for me the more you'll *want* to talk. Think it over. I can shut the front door myself. So long, Mrs. Deane."

He went out of the room. A few seconds later she heard the front door shut. She sat down in the chair. She put her arms along the sides of the chair. She sat looking straight in front of her.

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At eight o'clock O'Day paid his bill at the Silver Grill. He came down the stairs; walked along Albemarle Street. He went into the telephone box at the bottom of Hay Hill; telephoned the hall-porter at his apartment block.

He said: "Good evening, Simmons. Any messages or callers for me?"

"Yes, sir," the hall-porter said. "Your office came through . . . Miss Trundle. She said she wanted to leave a telephone number and an address for you. The address is 23 Mervyn Court, St. John's Wood, and the number is Primrose 06345."

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"Thanks," said O'Day. "Anything else?"

"Yes, sir. A gentleman telephoned you about five o'clock this afternoon—a Mr. Dougal. He came around about a quarter of an hour ago. He said he wanted to see you on a very particular business."

O'Day asked: "What's he going to do?"

"He said he'd call again," said Simmons.

"All right . . . if he calls tell him that I shall be in between ten and eleven o'clock tonight—I hope."

He hung up; stood, leaning against the side of the call box, thinking about Mr. Dougal. They hadn't wasted much time. They'd found Merys and she'd given them all they wanted to move on. The police technique was obvious. First motive; then opportunity; then supporting evidence. Murder to a policeman was a matter of cause and effect.

O'Day wondered exactly what Merys had told them; shrugged his shoulders. He thought he could answer that one. She'd given them motive, opportunity and evidence. She'd told them that Ralph Vanner was going to cite O'Day as co-respondent in a suit he proposed to bring against her for divorce. She'd told them that Vanner had either beaten O'Day up personally or hired someone else to do it on Wednesday night; that a meeting has been arranged between them at the Palissade Club at midnight on Thursday; that O'Day had turned up, and told her on the telephone that Vanner hadn't arrived. She'd probably given them the time of her telephone call. Dougal, thought O'Day, probably considered that he had an open and shut case against O'Day.

He found some coppers; dialled the Primrose

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number. After a moment Merys Vanner's voice came on the line.

O'Day said : " Well, Merys . . . where do we go from here ? "

She laughed—not a particularly pleasant laugh. Then she said : " That's rather up to you, isn't it, Terry ? "

" I suppose it is. You know what I think, Merys ? I think you and I ought to have a little talk."

" I think you're being very wise, Terry. I should think you are going to need all the help you can get."

O'Day said : " Maybe. I suppose it's never occurred to you that might be wrong. Even a brain as sharp and clever as yours, Merys, can slip up sometimes. Besides, you don't really believe that I killed Ralph, do you ? "

" Why not ? You had it in for him. He was going to make life pretty unpleasant for you one way or another. And he arranged that you had a beating-up the night before. I didn't turn up at that meeting because I knew there was going to be a row. What would you expect when you get two hostile personalities like you and Ralph arguing over a woman."

O'Day grinned. " There was nothing to argue about. I never argue about women—certain not a woman like you, Merys."

" That's fine, Terry. All you've got to do is to make *them* believe that."

O'Day said : " I grant you it's going to be a tough job. Shall I come round now ? "

" Of course." Her voice was almost honeyed. " I'd like to see you so much, Terry."

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"You'll be seeing me," said O'Day. He hung up.

He walked back to where he'd parked the Rover car in Albemarle Street; drove out to St. John's Wood. When he rang the bell at the Mervyn Court apartments he wondered how Merys was going to play it now. He wondered what her technique would be. Whatever it was, he thought, it would be very interesting, very slick. Merys was no fool. She thought that she had him where she wanted him and she'd make it as tough as she could. And perhaps she thought she had something else up her sleeve. You never knew with Merys. At the back of his head was the idea that he wanted to pay another visit to the Palissade Club. His examination of the place, he thought, had been much too cursory.

He wondered if the police would keep the place under observation. He thought probably not. Having established the fact that Vanner *had* been murdered; having looked over the premises and taken the usual photographs, the police would be more concerned with asking questions than keeping an officer on the scene of the crime.

The door opened. Merys said smilingly: "Come in, Terry. It's nice to see you."

She led the way into the rather ornately furnished sitting-room. O'Day put his hat on a chair.

He said: "There are moments when I almost admire you, Merys. You've got one hell of a nerve."

She smiled at him. "Why not? What have I to lose? What would you like to drink, Terry? Brandy, whisky, rum . . . ? I have everything. . . ."

"I'd like a whisky and soda." He watched her while she was mixing the drink.

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She was wearing a black taffeta cocktail frock with a close-fitting bodice and a flowing, new-look skirt. The frock was trimmed attractively with black velvet. She was wearing two very good diamond and emerald clips, and a plain gold mesh bracelet on her left wrist. There was a black velvet ribbon in her hair.

O'Day sat down on the settee against the wall. She came over to him, a glass in each hand ; gave him his drink.

He took a long and expert look at the diamond and emerald clips. He said : " Nice work, Merys. Who gave you those clips ? They're worth a lot of money. You didn't get those out of any bargain basement. And you certainly didn't get them from Ralph. It's a long time since he's had any real money."

She smiled at him cynically. " They *are* nice, aren't they ? I've always liked nice jewellery. But where I got them is my affair and that isn't the important matter at the moment."

She moved over to the fireplace ; stood there, her back to the fire, looking at him. He thought her eyes were quizzical, almost amused.

" Well, Terry, what are you going to do about it ? "

" About what ? " he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. " Why don't you stop pretending ? You're in a hell of a spot, aren't you ? Ralph's been murdered and it looks to me as if you're going to be elected for it."

O'Day said : " Listen, sweetheart. You can't bring charges of murder against a man unless you have something to go on."

" And you don't think the police have anything to

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go on?" she asked. "They came to see me this morning. They asked the sort of questions they usually ask. Well, it wasn't any good my doing anything else but tell the truth, was it, Terry? And it doesn't look so good for you."

O'Day shrugged his shoulders. "All right. It doesn't look so good for me. Tell me why."

"Don't be silly," she said. "For the last two weeks Ralph has been putting the idea about that there's been a lot on between you and me. I happen to know that he asked someone to go down to the Sable Inn and check up on the evidence there. He was going to bring a divorce action against me and cite you as co-respondent."

O'Day said casually: "Very interesting. He was aided and abetted in that rumour by you, wasn't he, Merys? You were the one who started this rumour. Well, did he get someone to go and check up on it?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "How should I know? But I bet he went down there or sent someone else."

"And what would he find when he got down there?" asked O'Day.

She shrugged her shoulders. "He'd find that I stayed there for one night with you. He'd find your name in the hotel register."

O'Day said: "It's pretty good circumstantial evidence as a start, I grant you, but I don't think it means very much in a murder case. Supposing you go on."

She laughed. "It gets worse as you go on. So Ralph is an aggrieved husband—naturally aggrieved when he finds what his partner has been playing at

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with his wife. He gets his evidence and I suppose he is about to bring the divorce action against me. But he's scared of you. He knows you've got a hell of a temper. He knows that somehow you'll try to stop him doing what he intends to do. That's why he keeps out of town. And that's why he's got a bodyguard looking after him. You're much tougher and stronger than Ralph was, you know. But you get after him. You find out he's going to the Palissade Club and you go down there. What you went down there for I don't know. But when you arrived you ran into the bodyguard. And they gave you a damned good hiding. Ralph told me all about it.

"The next day he made an appointment to see you in the office. He asked me to be there. He said there was going to be a show-down. Well, for some reason—I don't know why—he telephoned me later and told me to get in touch with you and to say he couldn't get to the office ; to let you know that he had to be at the Palissade Club and to ask you to go down there at twelve o'clock. He said he'd got to see you—and no nonsense this time."

O'Day said : "That's right. The only difference was that although you were supposed to be at the appointment in the office, for some reason best known to yourself you weren't at the appointment at the Palissade Club."

"Because I came to the conclusion that I didn't want to be there. But you were, Terry. You were there because I spoke to you on the telephone." She smiled maliciously. "You told me a lie."

"Did I?" O'Day asked. "What lie?"

"You told me that Ralph hadn't turned up. I

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thought that rather odd because Ralph's always been a very punctual man and he wanted to see you urgently. But he'd turned up all right. When you were speaking to me on the telephone he was dead. You'd probably lost your temper and hit him. But you weren't going to tell me that, were you? Well, I had to tell the police what happened and I told them what happened."

O'Day yawned. "Why not? So that's the story you told them, Merys? You told them that Ralph was going to bring a divorce action against you and cite me as co-respondent. You told them Ralph had had me beaten up at the Palissade Club the night before last; that he'd cancelled the appointment to see me at the office with you yesterday to have a show-down, and made another one at the Palissade Club. And you didn't turn up. I expect you told the police," said O'Day, "that you didn't turn up because you were afraid of trouble. Is that right, Merys?"

She nodded. The same cold, malicious smile played about her mouth. "Yes, something like that. And it was *true*. After what had happened the night before I *was* afraid of trouble."

O'Day grinned. "What else did you tell them?"

She looked at him. Now her expression changed; it was almost one of amusement. "I told them the truth, Terry. I told them that soon after twelve I was fearfully worried about the pair of you. I was scared. I know that you can be very bad-tempered if you want to be, and I knew that Ralph was furious with you. I thought there might be some more trouble there and I was frightened. So I rang through and I spoke to you."

He nodded.

"And you told me," said Merys, "that Ralph wasn't there. That wasn't true, was it? Because the police doctor thinks that Ralph was dead then—at the time I spoke to you."

"That's too bad," said O'Day. "Is that all you've got to tell me?"

"Isn't it enough, Terry?"

"It's enough to go on with." He finished his drink; carried the empty glass to the sideboard. "Do you mind if I have another one, Merys?"

She said: "Please do."

O'Day mixed himself a small whisky and soda. He asked: "Why did you want to tell me all this? You knew pretty well that the police would get around to telling *me* about it, didn't you? You knew that they'd want to see *me* rather badly?"

She asked: "Have they talked to you yet, Terry?"

He shook his head. "Not yet. They haven't had a chance."

She came over to him. She stood very close to him. O'Day caught a suggestion of the subtle perfume she was wearing.

She said: "Listen, Terry. Don't be a damned fool all your life. You're in a hell of a spot, and you know it. This evidence may be circumstantial as you call it, but people have been hanged on less. And supposing you got away with it; supposing the jury thought there was an element of doubt and found you not guilty? You'd still be finished, wouldn't you? You'd be suspect for the rest of your life."

O'Day said: "Maybe. At the same time I'd like

to know what all this is in aid of. Where is this conversation getting us?"

"I'll tell you, Terry." Her voice softened. "I'm crazy about you; you know that. There've been one or two men in my life, but you're the only one who has ever meant anything. You and I could go places, I promise you."

O'Day grinned. "That sounds fine, doesn't it? I'd like to know how—with the best will in the world—we could go places at the moment with this nice little set-up, that you seem to have arranged so carefully, hanging over my head."

"Listen . . . I've told the police exactly what I've told you. But maybe I could tell them a little more. Maybe I could tell them something that would entirely alter the complexion of this circumstantial evidence—if *I wanted to*."

O'Day said: "I see. So you could do that if you wanted to. I bet I can make five guesses what the price would be—the price that I'd have to pay."

She asked: "Would it be so difficult? Lots of men would like to marry me, you know, Terry. I'm not such an unattractive person, am I?"

O'Day yawned deliberately. "You're damned unattractive to me."

"I see. . . ." Her voice was cold. She turned; went back to the fireplace. "Well, if that's how it is, you can get out of this the best way you can. And I hope you like it! I think the police have a complete case against you. I think they're going to make life very annoying for you."

O'Day nodded. "You bet they will. It's the business of the police to bring somebody to book for a

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murder. Everything points to me and they can't be blamed if they try and prove it *was* me."

She said : " If you were sitting on a jury ; if you'd heard the story as they will hear it, what would you think ? " She stood looking at him sideways. There was a peculiar smile about her mouth. O'Day thought she looked like a very attractive devil.

He said : " I know what I'd believe. I'd believe that this Terence O'Day went to the Palissade Club ; that there was a hell of a row between him and Vanner ; that he hit Vanner over the head. That's what I'd believe."

" Precisely," she said. " And that's what I hope they will believe."

O'Day said : " You ought to look pretty good in the box giving evidence. I suppose you'll be the heart-broken wife bewailing the loss of the husband whom she let down so badly. The contrite wife who, having sinned against her husband, now realises that it was indirectly through her that he met his death. You'll do that very well, Merys. You've always been a very good actress. There are moments when you make me laugh."

She said : " All right. One thing I promise you. Before this business is over you'll laugh the other side of your face and I'm going to do everything I can to make it as tough as hell for you. And *how* tough ! "

O'Day said amiably : " Well, that sounds like a cue for exit." He picked up his hat. " So long, Merys. I'll be seeing you. When I mount the scaffold steps on the way to my execution I'll try to think kindly of you and blow you a metaphorical kiss. Good night,

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Merys." He grinned at her. "I hope your pet canary dies."

He went out. She heard the front door slam behind him.

She stood in front of the fireplace. Then she brought up her hands on to the mantelpiece to support herself. She was as white as death, shaking with a rage which she could not control.

When O'Day went through the entrance doors of the apartment block, he saw Dougal sitting in the big oak chair beside the hall-porter's box. Dougal was wearing a quiet, double-breasted grey overcoat, his black Homburg on his knees and his gloved hands folded on the crook of his umbrella.

He got up as O'Day came into the hallway. "Mr. Terence O'Day?" he queried.

"Yes . . . they tell me you want to talk to me?"

"I'm Detective-Inspector Dougal of Scotland Yard, and I'd like to ask you a few questions if you could spare the time, Mr. O'Day. I've tried to get in touch with you before."

"I know. I've been busy. Would you like to come upstairs?" O'Day led the way towards the lift.

When they arrived at his flat O'Day said: "I think you'd like to take off your overcoat, wouldn't you?" He smiled. "I feel this is going to be quite a conversation."

Dougal nodded. He took off his overcoat; placed it neatly with his hat, umbrella and gloves at the end of the settee. He sat down.

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Looking at him, O'Day thought that Detective-Inspector Dougal seemed very unhappy at the moment. He had yet to learn that Dougall invariably looked like that.

He said : " I'm going to have a whisky and soda. Would you like one ? "

" I don't usually drink when I'm on duty," said Dougal.

" But you will this time, won't you ? " O'Day grinned. " There's nothing like getting the confidence of the other man, and they do say that whisky loosens the tongue." He went to the sideboard ; mixed the drinks.

Dougal watched him lugubriously. He thought gloomily that he didn't dislike O'Day. He thought that O'Day didn't look like a murderer ; qualified this thought with the idea that no one had ever laid down a sealed pattern of what a murderer looked like.

O'Day brought the drinks over ; handed Dougal his glass.

He said : " Now what's it all about, Mr. Dougal ? "

" I've come to see you about Ralph Vanner. He was killed last night at a place called the Palissade Club not far from Maidenhead. Well, in a case like that, Mr. O'Day, we always check with the relatives. The Berkshire police got into touch with Mrs. Vanner—Mrs. Merys Vanner²—and she was able to state that you had an appointment with her husband some time about midnight last night at this club. Is that right ? "

O'Day nodded.

Dougal went on : " She seemed fairly certain that

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you kept the appointment because she said she was rather worried about what might take place at this meeting, so she telephoned through to the club. She says she spoke to you. Of course she could have been mistaken; you can't be absolutely certain about identities on the telephone."

O'Day said: "Don't worry about that, Inspector. She spoke to me all right. I should think it would be soon after twelve. I was in the club room at the front of the house. The telephone rang and I answered it. At the time I thought the place was empty. I thought Vanner hadn't turned up. I've got an idea that I told her that."

Dougal nodded. "Of course, he *had* turned up, hadn't he?" He smiled gloomily. "He must have turned up. He would have been dead at that time ____."

"He *must* have turned up some little time before," said O'Day. "And so had somebody else. When I went round to the back of the house when I arrived, there were no lights in any of the windows. When I went to the back of the house the *second* time—after speaking to Mrs. Vanner on the telephone in the club room—there was a light on in the room where Vanner died."

"I see," said Dougal. "So you went round to the back of the house twice. The first time the light was off and the second time it was on?"

O'Day nodded. "Yes . . . somebody had turned it on during the time I went to the front of the house, spoke to Mrs. Vanner on the telephone and returned."

"Then you're suggesting, Mr. O'Day, that when

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you were standing at the back of the house after your arrival someone might have been with Vanner ; that he might have been dead then ? ”

O'Day said : “ I should think he *must* have been dead then.”

Dougal nodded glumly. “ Had you been to the club before ? Why did you go round the back way on your arrival ? ”

O'Day drank some whisky and soda. “ That was the way I knew. I had been there before. I'd been there the night before. I wanted to see Vanner then, but I was unlucky.”

Dougal raised his eyebrows. “ You didn't see him the night before ? ”

“ No,” said O'Day.

“ Mr. O'Day, I ought to tell you that we'd heard something about your having been at the club on Wednesday night. We heard that there'd been some sort of trouble.”

“ There was.” O'Day smiled ruefully. “ There was trouble for *me*. When I arrived the place was in darkness and I thought that Vanner hadn't turned up. I walked across the lawn and stood in the shadow of a coppice. I thought I'd like to see him arrive. There were two men in the coppice. They gave me a hell of a beating-up. When I was able to get to my feet they'd disappeared.”

Dougal said : “ You didn't see either of these men—so for all you know one of them might have been Vanner.”

“ It *might* have been Vanner, but I don't think it was.”

Dougal asked : “ Why not ? ”

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"I know Ralph Vanner pretty well. He's been my partner for some time. If he'd been sober he wouldn't have indulged in any sort of dramatics like that. If he'd been drunk he'd have tried to set about me without assistance from anybody."

Dougal thought for a little while; then: "I see. . . . So you think, Mr. O'Day. . . ."

O'Day interrupted. "I think an awful lot of things. I realise I'm in a jam. Your story's something like this: That Vanner and I had been at loggerheads; that I went to this club the night before last and got a beating-up at the hands of Vanner and a friend, or from a couple of toughs he'd employed to do it. I went back again to see him last night, and this morning he's found murdered. That's the story as you see it. What you're doing at the moment, Inspector, is looking for motive and opportunity." He grinned. "It looks as if you have them."

Dougal asked: "What are you trying to tell me, Mr. O'Day?"

"I'm not trying to tell you anything. What I'm trying to do is to get you to talk." O'Day finished his whisky and soda; got up; stood on the rug in front of the fireplace, smiling amiably at the police officer. "I'm not trying to be funny or withhold information or anything like that. In point of fact if I were a wise man I might refuse to say anything at all. I'm not even doing that. You'll find I can be very frank. I propose to be. But I'd like to hear you talk first of all. You tell me what you think and I'll tell you if you're right or wrong."

Dougal looked even more glum. "Actually, Mr. O'Day, I don't *think* anything at all. I never do much

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thinking at this stage in an investigation. I like to have *facts* to think about and, at the moment, I'm trying to get my fingers on some honest-to-God facts. Then I'll start thinking."

He paused and sipped some whisky and soda. He sighed gently. "That is very good liquor indeed." Then : "I've been told certain things and if you'd like to know what I've been told I'll tell you. I've been told that there have been rumours about you and the dead man's wife—quite a few people have heard these rumours. One of them is Jennings, who is head of the Assessors Department of the International & General Insurance Company, for whom you work. Most people who heard this story believed it. They believed it because it seems that Mrs. Vanner had herself suggested it was true ; that she'd gone even further ; that she'd told her husband that some little while ago you stayed at an hotel—a place called the Sable Inn, near Totnes in Devonshire—with her ; that naturally Vanner didn't like hearing this.

"It seems that almost immediately he began to neglect his business in your office and went out on a first-class jag. Apparently his idea was that he was going to file a petition for divorce against his wife and cite you as co-respondent. I take it that you knew about all this."

O'Day nodded. "I knew all about it."

"Then we come to the night before last," said Dougal. "Vanner went down to the Palissade Club, and apparently you heard somehow or other that he was going there. You went down to see him. And there was some sort of trouble for you. Whether it was between you and Vanner and another man, or

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two other men I don't know, and you say you don't know either. But the general idea would be that you wouldn't be awfully pleased with the beating-up you'd got. That's only natural."

O'Day grinned. "Nobody likes being beaten up."

Dougal shrugged his shoulders. "People react in different ways. However, apparently Vanner wanted to see you the next day. He made an appointment to meet you at your office some time in the evening, but he couldn't get there. It seems that he telephoned Mrs. Vanner and told her he couldn't keep the appointment in the office, but that he was going down to the Palissade Club and would like you and her to meet him there. He asked her to let you know. So she telephoned through to the office and told you, and she didn't go to Maidenhead herself because she thought there was going to be trouble. She stayed in her apartment."

O'Day said: "It looks as if she was right, doesn't it? There was plenty of trouble even if it was before I arrived."

Dougal nodded. "It's not very satisfactory, is it, Mr. O'Day? It doesn't add up."

"No," said O'Day. "And one of the things that don't add up, to my mind, is this: When Vanner went to the Palissade Club—I'm talking about the first visit—he *couldn't possibly have had any idea that I was going there because I didn't know I was going myself, but he has someone waiting to beat me up in case I do go there.* Doesn't that strike you as being odd?"

Dougal said carefully: "It might."

"And isn't it odd," said O'Day, "that having arranged for me to be beaten up he should expect me

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to turn up the next night to keep an appointment with him ? ”

Dougal shrugged his shoulders again. “ I don’t see that these points matter very much. In any event, what I think or what I don’t think doesn’t matter. I’m trying to get at some facts. Mr. O’Day, I don’t want you to say anything that you don’t want to say. I think you might like to tell me about this personally, but if you’d rather come along and make a statement, or if you feel you’d like to have advice before making it, that’s all right. But it isn’t any good asking *me* what *I* think.”

O’Day said : “ I’m not making any statement and I’m taking no advice. I don’t want it. I’m going to give you some, Inspector.” He lighted a cigarette. “ Listen to me. The *theory* that I killed Vanner isn’t too bad. Everything points to that. The rumours about me and his wife ; the story that I stayed at an inn in Devonshire with her ; the fact that I was beaten up by Vanner or somebody at his instigation when I went down to the Palissade Club ; the fact that I returned there to keep an appointment with him, and his wife didn’t show up because she thought there was going to be trouble. And then I killed him. It’s a nice story. The joke is it is just a story and the whole pyramid of evidence—circumstantial evidence—rests on a foundation that isn’t true.”

Dougall asked : “ Such as ? What is the flaw in the story, Mr. O’Day ? ”

“ I’ll tell you. I never stayed at the Sable Inn in Devonshire with Merys Vanner and I’m very lucky to be in a position to prove it. Mrs. Vanner arranged her night’s stay at that hotel very carefully. She

arrived at the hotel when everyone had gone to bed except the night porter. Obviously she'd been to the place before and knew what happened there. When she arrived she told the night porter that her husband was following in half an hour or something like that. She filled in the register, entering the names—Mr. and Mrs. Terence O'Day—and my address. She went to her room. Then she telephoned down to the night porter; asked him to make her some tea. She knew he'd have to go down to the kitchen to do that. While he was in the kitchen the supposed husband arrives. And I know who he was. And how do you like that, Inspector?"

Dougal raised his eyebrows. "I don't like it a bit." He produced a wintry smile. "I don't like it, because if it's true it looks as if I have a lot more work to do than I thought. But it sounds very interesting." He finished the whisky and soda. He went on: "Tell me some more about this visit of Merys Vanner and somebody or other to the Sable Inn."

O'Day said: "The idea was that she would pay the bill the next morning; that the man would get out without being seen by anybody—a very possible and excellent idea in the circumstances. Because, if it worked, everybody was going to believe that the man *must* have been me!"

Dougal nodded. "I can believe that," he said.

O'Day continued: "But one thing happened which upset Mrs. Vanner's little scheme. Her companion left his car outside the hotel when he arrived. Next morning he wanted it serviced. And he wanted the tank filled. So he wrote a note of instructions to a nearby garage. I went down to the Sable Inn and

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I was lucky enough to get that note from the garage ; they'd not thrown it away. And I recognised the handwriting. I had a note at this apartment from the same man last Saturday. He left it here for me. I know who he is. The handwriting on the note of instructions to the garage and the note left for me here is identical."

O'Day walked to the desk in the corner of the room ; unlocked a drawer. He came back with the two pieces of paper. He handed them to the police officer.

"This is the note of instructions which was given to the garage in Devonshire and here's the letter I received here. Get your handwriting experts to check them. And if that proves what I say to be true then the whole basis of your evidence falls to the ground."

Dougal said : " If what you say is true, Mr. O'Day, it looks as if Mrs. Vanner was trying to frame you."

O'Day nodded. " She's very nearly got away with it. I just happened to be lucky that's all. The garage will identify the note. I gave the garage hand five pounds for it."

Dougal said : " Don't you think it might be a good thing—for you, I mean—if you did make a statement, setting out the facts as you've told them to me. Then we can go and check with the Sable Inn. When we've proved what you say to be true we can talk to Mrs. Vanner."

" That wouldn't do you any good at all, Inspector. What's the good of talking to Mrs. Vanner ? You're looking for a murderer, aren't you ? So am I. I'm very interested in the identity of the man who killed

Vanner. I think we're much more likely to find him my way than yours. I don't think we want to disturb Mrs. Vanner at the moment. I think we want her to believe that she's got away with it."

Dougal asked : "Would you like to tell me why ? "

"Certainly," said O'Day. "Let's suppose a few things. Let's try and evolve a series of ideas which *do* add up. I'll tell you what they are. After Merys Vanner told her husband that she'd spent a night with me at the Sable Inn he wanted to get evidence to that effect. He approached a man who'd done some work for him. He asked this man—Windemere Nikolls, who works for Callaghan Investigations—to go down to the Sable Inn and check. Nikolls wouldn't do it ; he didn't want to be mixed up in something that he thought was rather unpleasant. He refused to go. Well, what would be the natural thing for Vanner to do ? "

Dougal said : "He'd probably go down there himself."

O'Day nodded. "My guess is that he went down there himself, and my guess is that through some stroke of luck he discovered that the person who'd stayed with his wife was *not* me. Do you understand ? He then wants to meet me."

Dougal raised his eyebrows. "If he discovered that, it's hardly likely that he'd have arranged for you to be beaten up. He'd be much more likely to want to apologise."

O'Day said : "*How do we know that he didn't want to apologise ? How do we know that it was Vanner who arranged to have me beaten up ?* My guess is that Vanner was nowhere near the Palissade Club on Wednesday

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night, or if he was he wasn't there to see me. He was there to see somebody else."

"You mean the person who killed him?" said Dougal.

"Why not? Work it out for yourself. I was told by a girl—a hostess in the Pimento Club—named Mabel Bonaventura—that Vanner was going to be at the Palissade on Wednesday night. I went down there after I'd received this information from her because I wanted to have a show-down with Vanner."

Dougal asked: "How did she know he was going to be there?"

O'Day smiled. "Mrs. Vanner told her."

Dougal considered the matter. "This seems very interesting."

"That's what I thought," said O'Day.

"You're suggesting, Mr. O'Day——"

O'Day interrupted. "I'm suggesting that the first time Vanner wanted to get in touch with me was on the day that he'd arranged for the appointment at the office—yesterday. He had asked for his wife to be present. He said he wanted a show-down, but it was a very different show-down, Inspector, from what *she* thought. My belief is that in my presence Vanner was going to confront her with the fact that he knew I was not the man who stayed at the Sable Inn with her. I think it's rather odd that he didn't turn up for that appointment. Maybe, somebody stopped him, or maybe he had this other appointment at the Palissade Club and thought we might as easily go there. That's my theory."

Dougal said: "It seems to me, Mr. O'Day, that you've quite a lot of ideas about Mrs. Vanner."

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O'Day nodded. "I have. . . . Someone once said 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.' She was gunning for me. She was gunning for me because I wasn't even a little interested in her."

"Are you suggesting that in some way or another Mrs. Vanner was planning her husband's death, with the idea at the back of her mind that you would be accused of it?"

O'Day shook his head. "I don't think so. I think she was just taking advantage of the situation. It's possible she knows nothing at all about the circumstances of Vanner's death, but it is my belief that if we'd seen Vanner last night at the office he would have wanted an explanation from her."

Dougal said: "I think the first thing is to check with the Sable Inn; to find out if, as you suggest, Vanner went there; to discover if we can what he found out. If he discovered through some chance that you weren't the man who stayed there, combined with the fact that you have produced this note of instructions about the motor-car, and the note left by this other man at your apartment here, then it seems to me that a different complexion might be put on this case."

O'Day said: "I think it would be a very good idea to do that, and while you're doing it, Inspector, there are one or two things I'd like to find out myself. I'm going to suggest to you that you have those enquiries made in Devonshire. If you are able to verify by your own investigations what I've said, so much the better. Then I think we might have another talk. Maybe I'll have some more theories to put up to you."

"I think that's a very good idea, Mr. O'Day. Tell

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me one thing. Where is this man you suggest stayed with Mrs. Vanner at the Sable Inn—the man who wrote the instructions to the garage—the man who left the note at this flat ? ”

“ He’s not here. He left for South Africa last Saturday, so that rules him out. *He* didn’t kill Vanner.”

Dougal got up. “ You won’t be leaving town for a little while ? ”

O’Day said : “ I might. Don’t worry. I shan’t be leaving the country. But I’d like to make one or two enquiries on my own. Perhaps after you’ve finished with Devonshire you’d like to get in touch with me.”

“ I’ll do that,” said Dougal. He put on his overcoat ; picked up his gloves, his umbrella, his hat.

“ Oh, by the way,” said O’Day casually, “ for what it’s worth I’d like you to know that I didn’t kill Vanner.”

The Detective-Inspector turned in the doorway. He said lugubriously : “ You know, Mr. O’Day, it’s none of my business to tell you this, but actually I don’t think you did. Good night. I can let myself out.”

He closed the front door of the flat carefully behind him. He thought that the Vanner case was going to be a very interesting one. He sighed. His last remark to O’Day had meant nothing at all. It was just one of those things. Intended to put O’Day’s mind at rest ; to give him that sense of security which might lead him to make a mistake—if he had murdered Vanner.

Dougal thought the case was one of those odd things that come once in a lifetime. The sort of business in

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which anyone could have killed anyone for all sorts of reasons.

He thought that Mrs. Vanner must be a very interesting woman—if what O'Day said was true.

He stopped in the street to light a cigarette. Then he went home to bed. • •

CHAPTER THREE

NEMESIS

O'DAY GOT UP at eleven o'clock. He came out of the bathroom, wearing a pair of pillar-box red pyjamas ; a black dressing-gown. He began to walk about the sitting-room, smoking cigarettes ; drinking cups of coffee.

He began to think about the personalities that had come into the story since last Saturday when he'd met Jennings on Plumpton race course.

First of all there was Dougal. O'Day was fairly certain that he knew what the Chief Inspector proposed to do. There was, in fact, only one thing he could do. Merys—O'Day grinned to himself—was, at the moment, *she* thought, on top of the job—the power behind the throne—the person who was sitting pretty.

Then there was Lauretta Deane. Mrs. Deane, he thought, was at the moment rather an unknown quantity. She might be doing this or that. She might be doing anything. She might be doing nothing. Nobody knew. He hoped that soon something tangible would turn up which would connect Mrs. Deane with some definite line of country.

And then there was Pavin. O'Day found himself greatly intrigued with Pavin. He might have come into the story in half a dozen ways, or he might not.

You paid your money and you took your choice of guesses.

O'Day thought that the thing that mattered at the moment was what *he* was going to do. He poured himself out a fresh cup of coffee ; sat down in the armchair, one long leg 'dangling over the side. He drank the coffee slowly. Now his mind was concerned again with Dougal. Dougal might waste a day thinking over things, allowing his mind to wonder on the implications of his conversation with O'Day of the night before. He might or he might not. You never knew with people like Dougal. O'Day smiled wryly. Too many people believed that police officers were rather stupid people with big feet. The idea was reminiscent of the old music-hall turns. But police officers — especially Chief Detective - Inspectors — weren't at all like that and beneath that quiet and lugubrious countenance O'Day realised there was an astute brain. He thought he'd know just how astute very quickly.

The house telephone rang. O'Day walked across the room ; picked up the receiver. It was the hall-porter.

He said : " There's a lady to see you, sir—a Miss Bonaventura. She seems to think her business is urgent."

O'Day grinned. " Send her up, Simmons."

He finished his coffee ; went to the front door of the flat ; opened it. The lift had arrived and Miss Bonaventura was walking down the corridor.

O'Day said : " Hello, Mabel. What's this—a celebration ? You look pretty good to me."

She said : " Yes ? Some celebration ! " O'Day

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noticed that the refinement had gone from her voice. Something or other had reduced Miss Bonaventura to her natural self.

O'Day said : " Come in."

She went into the sitting-room.

He went on: " Do you wonder I thought it was somebody's birthday?" He looked at her as she stood in the middle of the floor.

She was wearing a well-cut, black coat and skirt, the cuffs, revers and trimmings of black and white check. Underneath was a white silk blouse with a ruffle. She wore a small hat with a little veil. She looked very well-dressed; very chic; very mysterious.

She said : " Somebody's birthday, hey? For God's sake! Terry, I'm scared. . . ."

He asked : " Why? That isn't like you, Mabel. Would you like a whisky and soda? And sit down." He pointed to the armchair.

She said : " I never drink whisky in the morning . . . well, not much. But if you've got any crème-de-menthe. . . ."

He went to the sideboard; poured out the liqueur. He brought it to her.

He asked : " What's the trouble."

" *Have* I got trouble!" said Mabel bitterly. " First of all I've had a row with that Irish-Italian wop who runs the club. He got funny. He got funny because some policeman came to the club to ask me questions, and you know how much he likes policemen. So he was rude." She tossed her head. " Nobody's rude to me twice."

O'Day said : " You told him where he got off, Mabel?"

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She nodded. "I said to him, I said, you listen to me—and just remember you're talking to a lady. One more crack out of you, you so-an'-so an' I'm going to smack you down. And," she went on, "I said to him you know what you can do with your so-and-so club . . . ! And then I 'swept' out."

O'Day grinned. "I hope you got your money before you told him all this."

She smiled. "What do you think I am?"

O'Day asked: "What was all the trouble about with the policeman, Mabel?"

She settled herself in her chair. "That's what I came round about. This morning—and it would be just my luck that the boss was hangin' around the club—I went in there early—about a quarter past ten—and this policeman comes in—a Chief Detective-Inspector in plain clothes, named Dougal. He was looking for me."

O'Day said: "I suppose he wanted to talk to you about Vanner?"

She nodded. "That's right. He wanted to talk about Vanner. An' he talked plenty. He talked about Merys too. It's just my luck to get mixed up in a murder mystery. Fancy somebody knockin' off Vanner." Her expression changed. "It wasn't you, Terry, was it? I can't see you doing a thing like that."

He shook his head. "I give you my word I didn't do it, Mabel. I never go about the place using blunt instruments on ex-partners. What was it Dougal wanted to know?"

She said: "Well, he was very nice an' quiet. He's a funny sort of feller; he doesn't look like a police

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officer ; might be a coal agent or anything. He looked very sorry."

O'Day said : " He might look like that, but he's no fool, Mabel."

" I didn't think he was." She sighed again. " I thought things out, Terry, and I thought the best thing I could do was to tell him the truth." She shrugged her shoulders. " There wasn't anything else to do, anyway."

" You're quite right," said O'Day. " What was the truth you told him ? "

" He told me that you'd been down to this Palissade Club at Maidenhead. He said that you'd gone down there to meet Vanner ; did I know anything about that ?

" I said yes. I said you were worried about Vanner and wanted to meet him because there'd been some trouble between you two. I told him Merys Vanner had been in the club and told me that her husband was going to be there at the Palissade Club, and that I told you."

O'Day asked : " What did he say to that ? "

" He didn't say anything," said Mabel. " He asked me a lot of questions about Vanner. I told him what I knew ; which wasn't much."

" And he asked you some questions about Merys Vanner, I expect," said O'Day.

She nodded. " He asked me plenty of questions about you,—what sort of man you were ; what you did ; what the girls in the club thought of you ; how often you went there. You know, it's a funny thing but I told him a lot more than I meant to tell him. He's got a nice, soft, sort of miserable voice."

O'Day said : " Then what happened ? "

" He just went away. He said thank you very much, Miss Bonaventura. He said it was a very pretty name. Then he went off. I was going myself—I thought I'd better let you know what'd happened—when the boss came out. He asked me into his office and started reading the riot act and I let him have it. So now I'm looking for a job."

O'Day sat down in the chair opposite her. " Listen, Mabel, how would you like to do a job of work for me? And there aren't any strings to it. I tell you quite candidly that it's tied up with this Vanner affair. But you needn't worry. I'll give you my word that you won't get into any trouble."

She said : " Well, I've got to do something, Terry, and I wouldn't mind working for you if it's something I'd like."

He said : " All right. Well, you stick to the money I gave you the other night. You've earned it. While you're working for me I'll pay your expenses, and if you get what I want there'll be another fifty."

She asked : " What do you want me to do, Terry ? "

O'Day said : " You can go home ; pack a bag. Hire yourself a car—you can drive a car, can't you ? "

She nodded.

" Drive down to Alfriston in Sussex," went on O'Day. " Before you go ring up the Crown Hotel there and get yourself a bedroom. The landlord's a nice sort of person and is talkative. There's a man down there named Pavin. I have an idea you'll find him hanging about a place called Mallowfield not far from Alfriston,

or if you don't you'll find him over at the Splendide at Eastbourne. If you're clever with the landlord at the Crown you'll probably get a line on whether he's down there or not. If he's down there and you find out where he's staying, give him a telephone call. Tell him that you're a friend of Mrs. Merys Vanner ; that you'd like to have a little conversation with him. I think you'll find he'll want to talk to you. He'll make an appointment to meet you in some place. When you see him, say that Mrs. Vanner's asked you to give him a message ; that things haven't gone quite so well ; that she doesn't want to be a trouble but she'd be very grateful if he could give her a hand just once more. Tell him that she says she's in a bit of a spot and wants to leave town. Just tell him that."

"I understand," said Mabel. "Then what happens?"

"I think you'll find he's going to give you some money. He'll probably make an appointment to meet you and he may give you a message for Merys Vanner. If he does, bring it back to me, with whatever he gives you. That's easy enough, isn't it?"

She thought for a moment ; then : "All right, Terry. You say there're no strings to this ; that I'm not going to get myself into any trouble?"

He shook his head. "You won't get into any trouble, Mabel, I promise you."

She asked : "When do I start?"

"Directly you've had another glass of *crème-de-menthe*," said O'Day. "Go over to Forbes' Garage on the other side of the square. I'll speak to them on the telephone. They'll let you have a small car which

you can drive yourself. Then ring up the Crown at Alfriston and get busy. If you want to get at me, 'phone me. Leave a message with the porter if I'm not here." He wrote the telephone number on a piece of paper.

Mabel Bonaventura sighed. She got up. "Well, I don't know what it's all about, but it sounds adventurous to me." She sighed again. "I like adventure, but it don't very often come my way, or if it does it's in the shape of one of those heels who hang about the club. Maybe this will be different."

O'Day said : "You bet it will be. Anybody who looks like you, wearing a hat like that, is certain to run into something."

He gave her the glass of *crème-de-menthe*. She drank it expertly in one gulp.

She said : "You know, I like this liqueur. It's lovely when it hits the back of your throat. Well, I'll be seeing you, Terry. So long !"

He let her out of the flat. He thought Mabel was pretty good value—especially when she didn't know exactly what she was doing. He grinned. This time she certainly didn't.

When she'd gone O'Day rang up the garage ; gave them instructions. Then he rang Callaghan Investigations. When Effie Thompson—Callaghan's secretary—came on the line he asked to speak to Windemere Nikolls. She told him to hold on. A minute later Nikolls' voice came on the telephone.

O'Day said : "Hello, Windy. This is O'Day."

Nikolls said : "Yeah ? You're havin' a big time, aren't you ? A lot of trouble in your firm lately. I wonder what Vanner did to somebody to get himself

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knocked off like that. That boy certainly used to get around."

"He certainly did," said O'Day. "I'd like to have a word with you, Windy. I suppose you wouldn't be anywhere in the region of the Silver Grill at six o'clock tonight?"

"Sure thing," said Nikolls. "Anything to oblige. I like the rye whisky they keep there. I'll be there at six."

O'Day said: "Right. I won't keep you long, I promise you."

He hung up. Things, he thought, were beginning to move.

Chief Detective-Inspector Dougal finished a light lunch consisting of a mutton chop, vegetables, a small piece of cheese and a cup of coffee. Then he walked back to Scotland Yard. He went to his office; smoked a ruminative pipe. He took off the telephone receiver; made a call to the Assistant Commissioner; went down to his office.

As he closed the door behind him, the Assistant Commissioner asked: "Well, how's it going, Dougal? Sit down."

Dougal sat in the big chair on the other side of the desk.

He said: "It's very interesting, sir. If you remember the details of this case the whole thing starts with trying to find a motive for somebody wanting to kill Vanner. Well, we had it. We had a very good, ready-made motive and the person who had the motive

was Terence O'Day. The story was simply this : O'Day stays at the Sable Inn with Vanner's wife—Merys Vanner. She's fond of O'Day and therefore she doesn't like her husband. She doesn't care who knows it. She tells several people about it, including Jennings—the head of the Assessors Department of the International & General Insurance Company. I saw him this morning.

"Apparently she'd also told her husband, so she was trying to throw a spanner in the works. She certainly wanted *somebody* to do *something*. The next thing that happens is that Vanner goes to the Palissade Club and O'Day goes down to see him. There's some sort of trouble down there and O'Day gets beaten up. That looks simple enough, doesn't it, sir ? "

The Assistant Commissioner nodded. "Quite obviously Vanner is trying to get back at O'Day."

Dougal said : "It *looks* just like that. And the next thing is that for some reason best known to himself Vanner, who has made an appointment with O'Day, goes down the next night to the Palissade Club. O'Day goes there also. He takes a telephone call from Mrs. Vanner, who's rather scared as to what might happen there. Vanner gets himself killed. You know, sir, it struck me in the first place that the evidence was too good to be true."

"You don't like it, Dougal ? " queried the Assistant Commissioner.

Dougal shook his head. "The whole thing rests on this business of the Sable Inn. That was the thing that caused all the trouble and, according to O'Day, that wasn't true. The thing is," Dougal went on, "I believe O'Day."

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"Does O'Day say he didn't stay at the Sable Inn with Merys Vanner?"

"Not only does he say that," said Dougal, "but he says he can prove it, and I don't think he's too much of a bluffer. It seems that he went down there to discover that Merys Vanner had stayed there with some man on a very clever plan. The man arrived late after she'd got the hall-porter out of the way. Nobody seems to have seen this man. *She* put the names—Mr. and Mrs. Terence O'Day—in the registration book. *She* paid the bill the next morning.

"But," Dougal went on, "this unknown man, who arrived late in a car, sent a note of instructions down to the garage next morning to have his car serviced. O'Day's got that note. He's given it to me. This note was in the handwriting of the man who stayed with Mrs. Vanner and it's not O'Day's handwriting. That I know."

The Assistant Commissioner raised his eyebrows. "This is interesting, Dougal."

Dougal nodded. "Not only that, but O'Day's given me another specimen of this same handwriting—a note written to him by a man he knows—an American by the name of Needham who's in Africa at the moment."

The Assistant Commissioner said: "If all this is true then the Vanner woman is trying to frame O'Day?"

Dougal nodded. "It looks like that, sir. Because if O'Day did not stay there with her—and it looks as if he didn't—she lied to Jennings and she lied to her husband. What's she doing this for? She's obviously doing it to create a situation between Ralph Vanner

and O'Day. O'Day told me that he didn't know that Vanner was going to the Palissade Club on the first night until he was told by a girl named Mabel Bonaventura—a hostess at the Pimento Club. I saw her this morning, sir. She knew that Vanner was going to be at the Palissade Club because Mrs. Vanner came into the Pimento and told her so. Now it's beginning to add up, isn't it ? ”

The other man nodded. “ What you're suggesting is that Merys Vanner started this false rumour in order to get her husband up against O'Day. She knows her husband is going to the Palissade Club. She knows that O'Day will want to see him because he's heard these rumours. So she makes certain that O'Day knows where he's going to be. O'Day goes to this place and gets beaten up ? ”

Dougal nodded. “ And he's got an idea,” he said, “ that it wasn't Vanner who did the beating up.”

The Assistant Commissioner asked : “ What are you going to do, Dougal ? ”

“ All I can do, sir, is to follow my nose. I'm going down to the Sable Inn. I want to find out exactly what did go on there that night. I want to check on the handwriting in the hotel register and see that it was Mrs. Vanner who put those names in. You never know. Somebody might have seen this unknown man—even somebody unconnected with the hotel—somebody who normally would never be asked.”

The Assistant Commissioner said :

“ I think you're right. When are you thinking of going, Dougal ? ”

Dougal got up. “ There's no time like the present. I want to move quickly on this case.”

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The Assistant Commissioner smiled. "What's in your head, Dougal?"

Dougal said: "I don't dislike this Terence O'Day. If I know anything about it he's no murderer. His attitude is too carefree. I've usually found when I've been trying to get a statement from somebody suspected of murder, that they're a little bit too keyed up. They're taking a lot of notice of what you say; the way you frame your questions. They're afraid they might make a mistake in the story they're trying to put over. O'Day isn't. He doesn't give a damn. He's quite carefree in what he says."

The other nodded. "Well, you don't believe he did it. So what?"

"It's not only that, sir," said Dougal. "He's playing some game of his own. You may not believe this, but I had a definite idea in my head when I was talking to this O'Day that in some odd sort of way he was using me. I felt a little bit resentful."

The Assistant Commissioner smiled. "Naturally. But I can't see anybody making use of *you*, Dougal. Let me know when you come back. I'm just as interested as you are."

"I'll see you directly I get back, sir. Good afternoon."

Dougal went out of the office, looking more lugubrious than ever.

At six o'clock O'Day finished his Martini; lighted a cigarette; put on his hat. He was walking towards the door when the telephone rang. He picked up the

receiver ; smiled when he recognised the voice. It was Mrs. Deane.

She said : " Good evening, Mr. O'Day. I'm in London. I thought I'd take advantage of your invitation to come and see you. I'd like to talk to you."

" I'm glad you feel like that," said O'Day. " Tell me, Mrs. Deane, just how much do you feel like talking ? Is it going to be a reconnaissance or are we going to talk a little truth for a change ? "

She said in the same cool voice : " I always speak the truth, Mr. O'Day. It isn't much good doing otherwise, is it ? "

" No . . . not in certain circumstances." He went on : " I was just going out. I've an engagement in half an hour's time. I wonder if you'd like to come round at eight o'clock this evening. Would that be convenient to you ? "

" I'll make it convenient. You see, Mr. O'Day, I feel I don't want you to go to any more unnecessary trouble."

" Thank you very much," said O'Day. " I promise you I won't—not any *unnecessary trouble*. Then I'll expect you at eight ? This place is on the east side of Sloane Square. It's easy to find and you have the address on my card."

She said : " I'll be there."

O'Day hung up ; went out ; walked across the square to the garage.

He parked his car in Berkeley Square ; walked up Hay Hill, down Albemarle Street. Windermere Nikolls was sitting on a high stool in the downstairs bar, drinking rye.

O'Day said : " Good evening, Windy."

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"And to you," said Nikolls. "It's a nice sorta evenin'. Have a drink?" He ordered a double rye whisky for O'Day. He went on: "I bet it's something about Vanner, hey? Something you want to know. That boy had been gettin' around lately, hadn't he? I wonder why he had to get himself killed like that."

"I wonder too," said O'Day. "Perhaps there was a reason for it."

Nikolls nodded. "Maybe. Maybe some guys would think the reason was you. Maybe they'd think it was sorta convenient for you when he passed out like that. But not me!" He grinned. "I can't see you operatin' with a blunt instrument—not that he hadn't got the thickest head."

"You don't think he was very clever, Windy?" asked O'Day.

Nikolls shook his head. "Me—I always thought Vanner was a temperamental sorta guy. You know, couldn't keep his feet on the ground. He was either right up or right down. He exaggerated everything in his mind. He wasn't a cool guy—definitely not! And he was one of those eggs who believe too much of what people tell 'em."

O'Day said: "You mean about his wife?"

Nikolls said: "Why not? Me—I think he took life a' whole heap too seriously."

"When he saw you, Windy," said O'Day, "and asked you to go down and make that investigation at the Sable Inn—the job you turned down—was that all he said about it?"

Nikolls thought for a moment; then: "Well, when I told him I wasn't keen on handlin' the job he

asked me if I knew of anybody who'd do it. I told him to go and see Bale. You know George Bale? He specialises in divorce an' that sorta stuff. He's gotta nose like a ferret, an' he likes that business. I've never known such an egg for finding out who was doin' what an' why."

O'Day asked: "Do you think he went to Bale?"

Nikolls shrugged his shoulders. "How would I know? Maybe he did; maybe he didn't. Why don't you ask Bale?"

"I will," said O'Day. He ordered two more drinks; drank his own quickly. "I'll be seeing you, Windy." He went out.

He stopped at the telephone box on the corner of Hay Hill; went inside; looked up Bale's number. He dialled it. A woman's voice answered. When he asked for Bale she told him to hold on. A minute later he came on the line.

O'Day said: "Mr. Bale, my name's O'Day. Ralph Vanner was my partner. Windemere Nikolls suggests that you did a job for Vanner down at the Sable Inn. I rang through to know if you did or not. You can probably guess the reason I'm asking you."

"I think I can understand why you're interested, Mr. O'Day. Vanner talked a lot about you."

"I expect he hadn't anything very good to say about me?"

"I don't know about that," said Bale. "He didn't sound too unpleasant to me. But you're making a mistake, Mr. O'Day. He didn't ask me to go down to the Sable Inn, wherever that may be."

"No? I wonder if you could tell me where he did ask you to go."

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Bale said : " Well, usually I don't discuss my clients' private affairs, but it looks to me as if Vanner's affairs aren't going to be private any more now he's dead. So I don't think I'm doing any harm if I tell you. He paid me to go down to some place in Sussex. He paid me to tail a woman down there ; to find out what she was doing."

O'Day asked : " Did you find her? Did you discover what she was doing? "

Bale said : " Look, that's going a little too far, isn't it? I've told you what he asked me to do, but I don't think I ought to say any more. Maybe he wouldn't have liked it."

O'Day thought for a moment ; then he said : " I think I understand your point of view. O.K. Thanks a lot." He hung up ; went back to his car.

O'Day went back to his apartment at a quarter to eight. He turned on a musical programme softly on the radio ; lighted a cigarette ; began to walk about the sitting-room. He wondered what Dougal was at. He thought he knew the answer to that one. He thought he'd be receiving another visit from Dougal very shortly—maybe the next day or the day after that.

The house telephone rang. It was Simmons. " There's a Mrs. Deane to see you, sir."

" Ask her to come up," said O'Day.

He walked across the hallway ; opened the front door. She was just about to ring the bell.

O'Day smiled. " Good evening, Mrs. Deane. Come in."

He took off her mink coat, threw it over the settee in the sitting-room. He took a long look at her.

He said : " If I were a brave man I'd tell you you look good enough to eat, Mrs. Deane."

She smiled coolly. He thought she was quite imperturbable. In whatever circumstances she found herself, Mrs. Deane was certainly the mistress of her emotions.

She looked quite lovely. She was wearing a midnight blue, silk velvet dinner gown, with long, tight-fitting sleeves. She wore midnight blue, spangled shoes. A string of pearls round her throat glowed softly under the shaded electric light.

O'Day said : " Sit down and tell me what it's all about."

She sat down in the armchair. " I've come here, Mr. O'Day, because I think it's unfair of me to allow you to be put to any more trouble."

O'Day leaned against the sideboard. " Exactly what do you mean by that, Mrs. Deane ? "

She said : " I'll tell you. In a way I can understand your friend and mine—Colonel Needham—being a little worried about me. The fact that he thought I might be in some sort of danger is really rather stupid—but understandable. And I can quite realise your position in trying to carry out what he wanted done, especially now he's gone away and, neither of us can get in touch with him." She smiled. " But really it isn't at all serious, you know."

O'Day said : " No ? He seemed to think it was. Tell me why it isn't serious."

She settled herself back in the armchair ; crossed her legs. Then she said : " Men in love are always inclined to exaggerate situations, don't you think ? "

" I don't remember ever having been in love," said

O'Day. "So I can't tell. Who was exaggerating what situation—Needham?"

She said: "I think so. You know, Nicky Needham was an odd type of man. He was unlike any American I've ever met. He had the idea that he didn't get on well with women—quite a stupid one, because Nicky was rather a *nice* man. But when he was in charge of the parachute school at Mallowfield I thought he was very lonely. He liked talking to me." She shrugged her shoulders. "I like talking to people too. I'm *interested* in people. I was interested in most of the young soldiers who were at the school. I did my best to make life pleasant for them. I gave some cocktail parties and things like that. And Nicky liked going for walks with me. Most days he would come over to the Dower House in the evening for a cocktail.

"After a little while I realised that he was becoming rather too serious for my liking. I didn't want that because although I liked him a great deal and respected him for many things, he wasn't the sort of man I should ever fall in love with. Do you understand?"

"I understand," said O'Day. "I can imagine Needham being the sort of man you've described. Of course I never knew him from that point of view. In fact I only knew him quite casually. But I understand what you say."

She went on: "I had to make it obvious to him eventually that it was only possible for us to be friends."

O'Day asked: "And how did he take that?"

"Quite well. . . . He indicated that if that was how I wanted it that was how it was going to be. Then, when the war was over, he went away. I've never seen him since until some weeks ago, when he suddenly

appeared at Mallowfield. He'd heard something about me. He'd heard that I was engaged. I *am* engaged to be married to a Mr. Pavin. And hearing this seemed to have upset Nicky—quite needlessly, I thought." She smiled. "There's no doubt about it that he was very jealous of Mr. Pavin. Apparently he'd met him somewhere. He didn't like him. He'd very little that was good to say about him. I didn't take much notice of that. Men can be just as jealous as women."

O'Day nodded. "So you think that was all there was to it? Tell me something, Mrs. Deane. Did he tell you why he didn't like Pavin; why he was so jealous of him? Maybe"—he hesitated—"he thought you were making a fool of yourself."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Any man who's fond of a woman and realises that she's engaged to somebody else always thinks she's making a fool of herself. Wouldn't you, Mr. O'Day?"

O'Day looked at her. "I wouldn't know."

There was a silence; then she asked: "What are you thinking?"

He said: "I was thinking that it would be very easy to be fond of you, Mrs. Deane. I was thinking that if a man were fond of you he might do all sorts of things if he thought there was a chance of losing you."

"The question of losing me, as you call it, doesn't come into it. Nicky Needham knew that."

There was a pause; then O'Day said: "What sort of man was Needham as regards money—saving or generous? Did he throw his money about? Did he look after it carefully?"

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She shrugged her shoulders again. "I knew very little about his finances. He always seemed well supplied with money. He was kind and generous, but I don't think he was at all extravagant."

"You don't think he'd *waste* money?" asked O'Day.

She shook her head. "I'm certain he wouldn't do that."

"What you're telling me, Mrs. Deane," said O'Day, "is this: You're telling me that all this is a storm in a teacup; that Needham was jealous of this Mr. Pavin because Pavin was engaged to you and Needham hadn't made out with you. Is that it? And because it's like that I'm wasting my time?"

She said: "Yes."

"I don't believe you," said O'Day.

She shrugged her shoulders; got up. "I don't think I mind very much whether you do or not, Mr. O'Day. I came here because I wanted to save you some trouble."

"Nuts . . . ! You came here because you wanted me to stop poking my nose into something which you think doesn't concern me. I agree with you about one thing. I agree with you that Needham was a very careful man about money. He didn't waste it. Needham isn't the sort of man to pay seven hundred and fifty pounds just for me to find out what was troubling you, Mrs. Deane. That's what he paid. That's why I'm going to go on sticking my nose into your business."

She stiffened. The smile which had been about her mouth disappeared. She looked cold; angry.

O'Day said: "The time has come when you and I ought to understand each other. I could understand

Needham or anybody else being very fond of you ; very attracted to you." He smiled at her. "I'll tell you something. I'm very attracted to you myself. I think you're in some sort of a spot and I think you're scared to talk about it."

"I don't mind what you think, Mr. O'Day."

O'Day said : "My advice to you is to mind what I think very much. Incidentally, your jewellery seems to be jumping about the place a little, doesn't it? Remember that diamond and emerald bracelet I returned to you. That was part of a set, wasn't it? There was a brooch—a double-clip brooch—that went with it in emeralds and diamonds. Those stones were cut by the same man and the settings were the same. They've been doing a little travelling too, those clips, haven't they, Mrs. Deane? I saw another woman wearing them the other night. I suppose you wouldn't know why?"

He went on : "Ralph Vanner was murdered at the Palissade Club not many days ago. I'm very interested in the Vanner murder. I've got to be interested in it. I found your bracelet under the table in the room where Vanner was killed. I brought it back to you. I brought it back to you because Nicky Needham wanted you looked after, and I'm looking after you as best I can. After all, he paid seven hundred and fifty for that. But I haven't much of a chance unless you tell a little truth. Tell me how those diamond clips got where they did. They didn't walk. Neither did the bracelet. Tell me that, Mrs. Deane."

She said : "I don't want to discuss this matter with you any further."

"You mean you have failed in doing what you came

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here to do? I'll make a bet with you, Mrs. Deane. One of these days—very shortly too—you'll find you've got to talk. When that time comes, if you're a wise woman you'll come and talk to me. You know the telephone number."

She said: "Mr. O'Day, I think you're very rude. I don't think I ever want to talk to you again. Good-night."

She picked up her coat. She walked out of the room; crossed the hall. O'Day opened the front door.

He said: "Good night. Remember what I said. You'll find it's the easiest way."

He watched her walk down the corridor towards the lift. He thought she had a very attractive walk. Leaning against the door-post, watching her, he thought she was a hell of a woman.

He closed the door; went back to the sitting-room. He lighted a cigarette; began to pace up and down. He thought the time had come when events must be speeded up. The proverb 'when in doubt don't' might be good sometimes, but this wasn't one of those times.

He took up the telephone; dialled Merys Vanner's number. In a moment her voice came on the line.

O'Day said: "Good evening, Merys. This is O'Day."

"Good evening, Terry. How are you? Do you find life interesting or exciting, or a trifle unhappy and worrying?"

He said: "I don't think life's too bad. I don't think it's awfully exciting but it certainly isn't worrying—not for me. The person who's going to do the worrying is you."

"Yes? I wonder what makes you think that?" she asked.

"I'm going to tell you," said O'Day. "I'm getting into my car and I'm driving out to St. John's Wood. When I get there I'm going to tell you why you're going to start worrying. I'll tell you something else too. If you're a wise woman you're going to pack a bag and get out of town. And you'll get out to-night."

She asked harshly: "What the hell do you mean, Terry?"

"I'll tell you when I see you, but if I were you I wouldn't forget to pack the bag. So long, Merys."

He hung up. When he went downstairs to the car he was grinning.

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Merys Vanner opened the door of her flat. She stood, framed in the doorway, with the hall light behind her. She made a pretty picture. O'Day's eyes wandered slowly over her from head to toe. She wore a duck-egg blue, crepe house-gown, the neck and wide, flowing sleeves of which were edged with gold kid. Beneath the hem of the house-gown O'Day could see the toes of small, blue velvet mules to match the gown.

He said: "Good evening, Merys. So you've decided to stay?"

She smiled. "Of course, Terry. You surely didn't think you were going to scare me off, did you? Come in."

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He followed her into the sitting-room ; put his hat on a chair.

She sat down. She said : " There's a shaker of Martinis over on the drinks table."

He asked : " Shall I pour one for you ? "

She nodded. She said : " Do tell me, what was all this nonsense on the telephone when you spoke to me a little while ago ? Did you really think I was going to pack madly and leave town just because you asked me to ? Or are you trying to pull a bluff on me ? "

O'Day gave her the cocktail. He carried his own glass back to the fireplace ; sipped the drink. He was looking at her over the rim of the glass.

He said : " I don't believe in bluffing, Merys—not in a job like this. You're doing the bluffing, and you're going to get out."

" Exactly what do you mean by that, Terry ? "

He said : " I'll tell you. I had a visit from Chief Detective-Inspector Dougal—a very nice man. He's in charge of Ralph's murder enquiries. The police came to see you, and you told them a story. Dougal was checking up on it." He lighted a cigarette. " I thought it was time something happened in this case. I told Dougal one or two things that surprised him. At the present moment he's busily engaged in checking up on what I said, and when he comes back to London he'll know that what I told him is true, and that what you told the police was lies. So he's going to do something about that, isn't he, Merys ? "

She moved a little. " Exactly what do you mean, Terry ? " she repeated.

O'Day said : " You stayed at the Sable Inn in Devonshire with Needham. I know that and by a

stroke of luck I've been able to prove it. On the Saturday that Needham came to my office to see me he not only left a long letter for me there, but he came to my flat afterwards and left another note just in case I went there first. You understand that?"

She said: "Well, supposing he did?"

O'Day grinned at her. "You remember when you stayed with him in Devonshire he sent a note to a local garage asking them to pick up his car and service it and fill the tank. You must remember that, because it must have been you who handed the note to the porter or whoever it was delivered it. See what I mean?"

"No," she said. "I don't see what you mean."

"You damned fool," said O'Day. "The handwriting . . .?"

She said under her breath: "My God!"

O'Day's grin became even more cheerful. "Exactly. It's not so good, is it? You didn't think of that one. I went down to the Sable Inn and got that note of instructions. I've handed it, with the note Nicky Needham left at my apartment, to Chief-Detective-Inspector Dougal. You know what he's going to do, don't you? He's going down to the garage to verify that I did secure that note from them. They'll remember all right. I paid them a five-pound note for it. When Dougal's done that he's going to have the handwriting checked by an expert, and when he's done that he's going to know that you're a goddam liar, Merys. Unluckily for you that isn't the worst."

She said in a hard voice: "No?" She smiled at him. "Tell me what the worst is, Terry."

"Work it out for yourself," said O'Day. "The

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whole of the situation which has occurred has been built up on a false foundation—the story that I stayed with you at the Sable Inn. After that there's the supposed quarrel and my beating-up by Ralph. Then there's his death the night afterwards. Everything pointed to me, but if the Sable Inn thing is false then the police will naturally take it that I've been framed. See what I mean, Merys?"

"You mean . . . ?" She looked at him. Her jaw sagged a little.

"I'll tell you what I mean. Here is a woman who dislikes her husband so much that she tells him that she's stayed at a hotel with his partner, when in fact she stayed at the hotel with some other man. What does she do that for? For one reason only. She wants to get her husband up against his partner. Within a few days of this business coming to a head her husband is murdered. When they believed your story the evidence pointed to me, but now that they *won't* believe your story where do you think it's pointing, Merys? The next time you see Dougal he's going to ask you a lot of very pertinent questions. You'll find *you're* going to be his number one suspect—not me."

She asked: "How can anyone suspect me? They know when Ralph was murdered. They know you were there. They know I wasn't there. I was in my apartment here. I can prove it."

O'Day said: "I've no doubt, but that won't let you out. They are going to believe that whoever it was killed Vanner did it at your instigation. If Needham was here they might even suspect *him*. They might suspect him because he was the man who stayed

with you at the Sable Inn. But he's in Africa so his name's automatically removed. So they're going to look for some other man ; also they are going to look for some other man whom you know ; with whom you've been associated lately." He looked at her. "Have you any ideas about that ? " he asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

O'Day said : "Yes, you do. You know what I'm talking about, Merys. Tell me something . . . tell the truth *if* you can. Did you know that somebody was going to kill your husband ? Did you know that somebody was planning to kill him ? Have you any idea of a reason why somebody wanted him to die ? "

She said : "I don't know anything about it. I haven't the remotest notion who killed Ralph."

"But you do know that I didn't kill him," said O'Day.

She said nothing.

O'Day went on : "The joke is, I believe, that for once you might be speaking the truth. I think it might be quite possible that you had nothing to do with Ralph's death. Your difficulty will be to persuade them of that fact. I suppose you've been told, Merys, that if two people conspire together to commit a criminal act they can both suffer for it. If they believe that whoever killed Ralph did it with your help and approval they'll probably believe that you were the instigator of the idea, and if they believe that you'll hang."

She said in a low voice : "Exactly what are you getting at, Terry ? "

He smiled. "I'm going to put my cards down on the table, Merys. Believe it or not, in spite of your

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rather peculiar behaviour of late, Ralph was very fond of you. He wasn't a bad type, you know. I think without you he'd have been quite a person. All he needed was a decent woman in his life. Even so, I know that he wouldn't like the idea that you were going to be hanged because you were connected no matter how innocently with his death. And I think there's only one person who can put you in the clear."

She asked : " Who ? "

O'Day said : " I'm the person. Maybe I've an idea about what's been going on. Maybe I know something you don't know. You know, I've always been a good guesser. In any event, we're going to know all about it within the next day or two. So I'm going to give you the choice of two things. You can pack your bag and get out tonight and go where I tell you to go, and stay there till I tell you to come back. Or I'm going to talk to Dougal. And when I talk to him next time I'm going to say plenty."

She got up from the chair. She came towards him. She stood two or three feet away from him. She said : " Terry, what are you going to tell him ? "

" That's my business. Any further talks between Dougal and myself are just nobody's business—especially not yours. What I'm trying to do is to stop you from talking."

She looked at him sideways. " Meaning what ? " she asked.

" Use your brains, Merys. Tomorrow or the day after Dougal is coming back from Devonshire. He'll have checked on the handwriting of the note to the garage and the note to me. He'll know I'm telling

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the truth. You know what the first thing he's going to do will be, don't you? He'll come round to see you. He'll ask you why you lied to the police. He'll tell you what can happen to a person who knowingly makes a false statement to a police officer in a murder case. Then he'll ask you all about your visit to the Sable Inn with Needham. He'll ask you just what happened there. He'll try and tie up your visit to the Sable Inn with Needham's visit to my office. And this man Dougal's no fool. Chief Detective-Inspectors at Scotland Yard aren't idiots, you know, and he'll uncover what he wants to uncover. You see what I mean?"

She said: "I hear what you say."

O'Day went on: "If you're not here he's not going to waste time looking for you. He'll be too busy for the moment with other aspects of the case. He'll probably come to see me to ask me how much more I know. Dougal will know he can put his finger on you when he wants to. A woman who looks like you look isn't going to be able to hide herself for long. But I don't want Dougal talking to you for two or three days."

O'Day walked to the drinks table; poured himself another Martini. "Think it over, Merys. I warn you that if you don't do as I suggest you'll probably find that when they arrest Ralph's murderer they'll arrest you at the same time."

She went back to her chair. She sat down. "You're an odd type, aren't you, Terry—very quaint but damned attractive? The joke is I believe you're talking the truth."

"You know I am," said O'Day,

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She shrugged her shoulders. "Well, where am I supposed to go?"

"You don't have to go far away," said O'Day. "Get your bag packed. You'll only be away a couple of days. I'm coming back here in three quarters of an hour. I'll pick you up, and I'm going to drop you at the Garter Hotel near Goring. You'll be all right there. The place belongs to a friend of mine. You stay there until I tell you to come back, and if I were you I'd stay indoors just in case Dougal starts looking for you earlier than I think he will."

She got up. "All right, Terry." She shrugged her shoulders again. "Maybe I'm a fool but I'm going to do what you say. And I'd like another drink."

He took her glass; filled it; handed it back to her.

She said: "Anyone might think that you had some little regard for me. You're taking a lot of trouble about me, aren't you?"

O'Day shook his head. "Don't you believe it. What I'm doing—if I *am* doing anything—is for Ralph. And something else. . . ."

She asked: "What else?"

"I want those diamond and emerald clips you've got," said O'Day. "Hand them over. You know damned well they're not yours. You know who they belong to."

She spread her hands. Then she began to laugh. She went into the bedroom; came back. The clips were in her hand. She held them out to him.

"There you are, Terry. Believe it or not, you're a damned sight better detective than I ever thought you were."

O'Day said: "As detectives go, maybe I'm even

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better than *I* thought I was." He picked up his hat. "I'll be back in forty-five minutes. See that you're ready. And wear something plain. You don't want to look too conspicuous."

He went out of the room. A moment later she heard the front door close softly behind him.

She walked across to the fireplace ; put her elbows on the mantelpiece. She put her face between her hands. She began to cry.

II

Chief Detective-Inspector Dougal went into his office ; hung up his dark grey raincoat ; put his umbrella in the rack ; filled and lighted a short briar pipe. He sat at his desk smoking for quite two or three minutes before he remembered to take off his hat. He sighed ; hung it up. Then he called through to the switchboard to ask if the Assistant Commissioner was free. In two minutes they called back.

The girl said : "If you want to see Mr. Grogan, Mr. Dougal, he's in his office."

Dougal said : "Thank you."

He walked down the corridor ; tapped out his pipe with his forefinger ; put it into the pocket of his jacket.

The Assistant Commissioner said : "Good afternoon, Dougal. How's the Vanner case ? Sit down."

Dougal sat down. "At the present moment, sir, I might describe it as being quite unsatisfactory up to a point. After that"—he smiled ruefully—"perhaps it begins to get a little better."

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Grogan asked: "Did the Sable Inn produce anything?"

Dougal nodded. "O'Day's telling the truth. I went to the garage where the unknown man—who is no longer unknown—had his car serviced. The actual work on the car was done by the son who does the repair work in the garage. And by a strange coincidence he saw Needham—the man who stayed with Merys Vanner—as they were driving out of the side road that leads to the Sable Inn on to the main road. There's a sort of fork there, you understand—a three road fork—with the inn nearby. Apparently the boy had been staying at the inn for two or three days because there was a guest in their cottage, and he came out of the back entrance just as Merys Vanner and Needham swung on to the main road. Of course he recognised the car. He said the driver, as he went round the corner, was within a few feet of him. He was a thin-faced, grey-haired man. He said it wasn't O'Day. Of course he remembered O'Day. O'Day gave him five pounds for the note of instructions."

The Assistant Commissioner nodded. "Well, it doesn't look so good for Mrs. Vanner, does it? Have you any idea what she's playing at? Have you formed any theory as to how Needham comes into this?"

Dougal said: "I'm trying hard not to form theories at the moment, sir. I'm trying to concentrate on facts. And I've got another fact. Vanner had been down to the Sable Inn. He also talked to this boy. He knew that the man who stayed at the Sable Inn wasn't O'Day."

"Well, you've got something on Merys Vanner

now," said the Assistant Commissioner. "Do you propose to see her?"

"By all the rules I ought to go and see her at once, sir. I could throw quite a scare into her, couldn't I? She told her husband a cock and bull story and she told us a cock and bull story. But I think I'll leave her alone just for the moment. You see, I'm rather interested in O'Day."

"I can understand that," said the Assistant Commissioner. "But if he's not concerned with this Sable Inn affair it puts him in a very much better position—with us I mean."

"I'm perfectly certain he had nothing to do with that murder, sir. I've had the handwriting checked, and our man says that the note of instructions about the car and the note which Needham left at O'Day's flat were written by the same person. But I am interested in that note. You remember when I checked up originally on O'Day, we discovered that he was at Plumpton races last Saturday. He went back to his flat, and he found the note from Needham which had been left for him. This note says that Needham had been in England for some weeks. It doesn't explain why he put off seeing O'Day until the last moment—the day he intended to leave for Africa. I wish it did. However, it did say that Needham had written out the whole of some story which he wished O'Day to investigate and left it at his office. I thought I might get some sort of line if I investigated that part of the affair.

"So this morning I went to O'Day's office and saw his secretary—Miss Trundle—a very intelligent girl." Dougal smiled a little grimly. "I was very pleasant

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to her, sir," he went on. "And I was glad to be able to let her know that her employer—O'Day's position was very much better—with us I mean—than it had been. In point of fact I rather suggested to her that what I was doing was after a consultation with Q'Day. I asked her to tell me exactly what had happened on the Saturday morning.

"She told me. She described Needham, and her description checks up with the garage hand's description and with O'Day's own description. It seems that this Colonel Needham came into the office, and when he found he couldn't talk to O'Day, wrote a long letter of instructions; put it in a large envelope. Miss Trundle says it was a bulky package. He gave it to her to give to O'Day. There was no one else in the office. Apparently she left this package on her desk and went out to have some coffee and to buy some hair-setting lotion. She did that then because she knew the shop would be closed at one o'clock. She locked the door after her when she went out.

"When she returned to the office she took the package and put it in a drawer in O'Day's desk. This drawer is used as a sort of post-box for notes she wants to leave for him. Then she locked the office and went home. When she returned on Monday morning after the week-end the drawer had been forced open and the letter left by Needham had apparently been burned in the large metal ash-tray on O'Day's desk. When O'Day turned up on Monday morning he wasn't surprised, because he'd been there during the week-end after reading the note which Needham had left at his flat."

The Assistant Commissioner said: "I see. So

someone had been into the office and burned Needham's letter. Who do you think that would be? Would that be Vanner?"

Dougal shrugged his shoulders. "I haven't the remotest notion who it was, sir, but"—he smiled; Grogan thought it was the gloomiest smile he'd ever seen—"there's something very fishy about this burned letter."

"What?" The Assistant Commissioner sat back comfortably in his chair. He liked listening to Dougal. He had a great admiration for the processes of Dougal's brain.

"I had a look at the ash-tray on O'Day's desk," the Chief Detective-Inspector went on. "Now that ash-tray hadn't been cleaned since last Saturday when this business happened. By that I mean the cleaner or somebody had just emptied the ashes of the burned letter when she was doing the offices, but she didn't clean the ash-tray. There were quite a few particles of the burned paper still adhering to it."

"Yes?" said Grogan.

"Just to make assurance double sure, as Shakespeare said, I took the ash-tray away and, believe it or not, sir, the paper that was burned in that ash-tray was not the letter which Needham left."

Grogan said: "You don't say? So that was a plant too. You've checked on that?"

Dougal nodded. "Miss Trundle tells me that she gave Needham a pad of very good thick writing paper, sir. She gave me a couple of sheets of it for the test. The ash in the ash-tray did not come from that paper. I'll tell you what it was. In Miss Trundle's drawer is a pile of cheap draft typewriting copy

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paper. You know, the sort of flimsy stuff they take carbon copies on. That was the stuff that had been burned."

"So you think someone has Needham's letter? You think that if you had that letter you might know a great deal more about this case?"

Dougal nodded. "Obviously there's some connection between Needham and O'Day. Merys Vanner tells her husband, and other people, that she stayed at the Sable Inn with O'Day; she didn't; she stayed there with Needham. Needham wishes to see O'Day to give him some instructions about some lady somewhere in Sussex. There's got to be a connection. Somebody arrives and takes the letter and burns some copy paper in the cigarette ash-tray in order to make it appear that the letter has been destroyed, leaving O'Day in the dark because he was never able to read it."

The Assistant Commissioner said: "Well, who could have got into the office? Isn't it reasonable to suppose that Ralph Vanner, who had it in for O'Day, might have removed the Needham letter?"

"It could be like that, sir. But I thought before I did anything else I'd like to talk to O'Day. I have the idea in my head that he's got a lot up his sleeve. But he's not worrying. I told you his attitude was quite carefree when I talked to him last time. He was unperturbed because he knows he's in the clear. He knew that he could shake the story about his having killed Vanner by proving that it was Needham who stayed with Merys Vanner at the Sable Inn. That was one point. But he knows a lot more.

"I told you," he went on ruefully, "that I had an

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idea he was making use of me. I can't tell you why, but I did."

"I know," said the Assistant Commissioner. "And you didn't like it?"

Dougal got up. "I don't like people making use of me—not that it makes any difference if they want to try to. So I think I'll see O'Day. Maybe he'll let a little more go this time. Maybe he'll talk a little more. When I've seen him I think I'd like to talk to Mrs. Merys Vanner again."

Grogan said: "Do just what you feel like doing, Dougal. You always arrive eventually."

"I hope you're right. Good day, sir." Dougal went out of the office.

.

O'Day was lying on his bed dozing when the telephone bell rang. He got off the bed; looked at his wrist-watch from force of habit. It was just four o'clock. He went into his sitting-room; picked up the telephone. It was Mabel Bonaventura.

She said: "Hello, Terry . . . is that you?"

He said it was. He asked if she had had any luck.

She said: "Plenty. I went down to this place The Crown at Alfriston like you said. I made friends with the landlord. Quite a boy, isn't he? He was a parachutist in the war and lost one arm. I like him."

O'Day said: "Good. Beyond your liking for the landlord what about Pavin?"

"I steered the conversation round to him two or three times," said Mabel. "But I hadn't any luck."

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Then I went over to the Splendide at Eastbourne. I thought the drive would do me good. I got into touch with the hall-porter there—Parker—a nice talkative sort of man. And, believe it or not, he told me that Pavin was having lunch in the dining-room. So I went in. I sat at the next table."

O'Day asked : " What does he look like ? "

" He looks to me like a very nice man. Very nice indeed ! "

" Where are you ? " asked O'Day. " Sometimes even telephones have ears."

" I'm talking from the call-box in Knightsbridge."

" Well, come round and talk to me here," said O'Day.

Five minutes later she arrived.

She said : " You know what I'd like, Terry ? I'd like a large whisky and soda."

" I think you've been enjoying yourself, Mabel," said O'Day.

She pushed a stray tendril back into place. " Do you know, I think I have. I think I'd make a good detective."

" I think so too. Well, did Pavin fall for the line ? You were sitting at the next table to him in the dining-room ? "

" That's right," said Mabel. " It was a bit late for lunch so there weren't a lot of people there. When I got the opportunity I said to him—the tables were close to each other—' Can I have a word with you, Mr. Pavin ? It's rather important.' He looked at me and he didn't seem awfully surprised. It seemed as if he might even have been expectin' someone to talk to him like that. He said : ' Of course, why don't

you come and sit at my table?' So I went over and I sat down," said Mabel. "And he asked me what I'd like to drink. 'So I told him."

"You told him you'd like a large whisky and soda?"

She nodded. "Then I said I didn't want to take up a lot of his time but I had a message from a mutual friend—Merys Vanner."

O'Day asked: "How did he react to that?"

"He took it quite nicely. He said: 'Oh, yes?' He smiled at me. He asked: 'What does Merys want?' I said to him: 'You know, there's been a little bit of trouble. She's in rather a spot. She thinks it'd be a good idea if she got out of town for a little while. She wondered if you could help.' I told him that she hated to be a trouble to him, but what could she do?"

O'Day asked: "What did he say to that one?"

"That didn't surprise him. He smiled—a funny sort of smile—what's the word for it . . . ?"

"Cynical?" suggested O'Day.

"That's it . . . a sort of cynical smile. Then he brought out his note-case—very quietly, and there was nobody looking. He took out ten fivers. He pushed them across the table to me and he said in the same funny sort of way: 'Tell Merys I'm sorry she's in a spot. Give her this with my love.' When he said that he *wasn't* being sarcastic," said Mabel. She opened her hand-bag; took out a small packet of five pound notes. "Here it is—fifty pounds."

O'Day put the money in his pocket.

Mabel went on: "Then I said, 'Merys said she might want to see you sometime. She thought

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perhaps you might like to see her. Where could she get in touch with you? Anyway, I expect she'd like to ring you up to say thank you for this.' He said he'd rather she didn't ring him up. He said if she wanted to get in touch with him to send him a note. He said he'd be staying at the Splendide for a bit. How have I done, Terry?"

"Pretty well," said O'Day. He got up; began to walk about the room. After a while he said: "I shouldn't think that Merys was much of a person for writing notes. I shouldn't think she'd ever put anything that really mattered on paper. I think she's a person who'd always use the telephone. She's probably always used it when she's been communicating with Pavin."

She asked: "What are you getting at, Terry?"

"I was just wondering if Pavin had ever seen Merys' handwriting. However, we've got to take a chance sometimes." He went over to the desk; brought a writing pad and a fountain pen over to Mabel. He gave them to her. He said: "Write this note, Mabel. Just put 'London' at the top and the day 'Sunday' and say. . . ." He began to dictate the letter.

"Thank you very much for being so kind to me. I knew that in the circumstances I could rely on you. I am leaving immediately, but I don't think it will be necessary for me to be away long. I expect you will understand what I mean—especially when I tell you that every cloud has a silver lining. But I'd like to see you soon, not because I want to ask for anything but because I think I ought to tell you one or two things that you should know.

NEMESIS

When it is possible I'll call through to you—at a meal time when you are likely to be in. I'll give the name of Mrs. Williams. Thanks once again. M.V."

She handed him the sheet of paper. He read it through.

"Now do the envelope," said O'Day. "Address it to him at The Splendide. Mark it personal."

She did this; handed him the envelope. O'Day folded up the paper; put it in the envelope; stamped it; gave the envelope to her to post.

Mabel said: "Well, I hope all this is O.K. Sometimes I get a little bit scared, Terry. You know I'm relying on you to keep me in the clear if anything goes wrong."

"You should worry, Mabel. There's nothing to go wrong."

She said: "The joke is I believe you. Anyway, I hope I do. Well, what's the next thing?"

"There isn't one for the moment. Just go home and put your feet up. Take it easy. Do you want some money?"

She shook her head. "I'm all right. You know I've always been a saving sort of girl."

"Right. You and I will settle up when this job's finished. Stick around, Mabel. If I want you I'll give you a ring."

She got up. "O.K., Terry. What about one for the road?"

"Why not?" said O'Day. "The bottle's over there and you know how you like it."

She mixed herself a stiff one. She drank it in one gulp. She said: "Whisky's marvellous stuff. When-

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ever I get low it always bring me back to normal . . . I hope . . . ! Well, so long, Terry."

He saw her to the door. He said : " If you run into Chief Detective-Inspector Dougal, and he wants to know where you've been, tell him you've been seeing your grandmother in Skye or somewhere a long way away—somewhere where it'll take him a long time to check on. So long, Mabel."

He closed the front door ; went back to his sitting-room. He lay down on the couch ; relaxed. He arranged the cushions behind his head and began to doze. He lay there, at peace, waiting for Chief Detective-Inspector Dougal to ring through.

He got up at six o'clock. He undressed ; took a shower ; dressed himself. He mixed a large Martini ; drank it. Then the house telephone rang. When O'Day picked up the telephone Simmons said :

" The gentleman who called before, sir—Mr. Dougal."

O'Day said : " Send him up."

He waited a minute ; then opened the front door. Dougal was coming down the corridor.

O'Day asked : " Well, how's it going ? "

Dougal smiled. " Not too badly. I've some good news for you."

O'Day closed the door ; led the way into the sitting-room. " That calls for a drink. That means you've checked up with the Sable Inn and you've proved the story I told you was true. Did somebody see him ? "

Dougal nodded. He put his umbrella and hat on the chair ; opened his raincoat ; sat down. O'Day handed him the 'glass of whisky and soda ; mixed another for himself.

Dougal said : " The garage hand—the son who did the repairs on the car—saw Needham as he was driving away. His description tallied with your secretary's—Miss Trundle."

O'Day cocked an eyebrow. " So you've been combing my office ? How did it stand up to it ? "

" Not too badly. But if you don't mind, Mr. O'Day, I'd like you to give me a little information."

" Why not ? " said O'Day. " But you might tell me something first. Are you asking me this information as a suspect or somebody who's in the 'clear ? " He grinned. " I'd like to know for my own peace of mind."

" Listen," said Dougal. " I might as well tell you here and now that I don't think you killed Vanner. In point of fact I'll go so far as to say I'm quite happy about you in this case except for one or two things. I'd like you to tell me what happened ; what you did when you came back to this apartment last Saturday night and found the note from Colonel Needham—the one you gave me—the note that told you that he'd left a letter of instructions and seven hundred and fifty pounds in notes at your office."

O'Day asked : " Why are you interested ? You know, there's a rule in my profession that we never discuss our clients' confidential affairs."

Dougal said : " That's too bad. But all sorts of rules get broken in murder cases, you know, Mr. O'Day. I'm not asking you to say something that's

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going to incriminate yourself. A policeman isn't allowed to ask questions like that or if he does you don't have to answer them. But it might make things a little easier for me if you answer my question. And maybe when you've answered it I'll tell you why I asked it."

O'Day said : " Yes. I suppose it's all right. When I got back to the flat and read Nicky Needham's note I was naturally curious to know what it was all about. It was rather an unusual sort of case, I take it. Here was some lady in Sussex who Needham thought wanted looking after, and you don't go to a firm of investigators and ask them to look after a woman if it's a normal thing, do you ? "

Dougal said : " No, I suppose not."

" So," O'Day continued, " I was curious. I got into my car and I went down to the office. When I was walking along the corridor I could see that somebody had left the light on in the office."

Dougal said : " That was rather funny, wasn't it ? "

" That's what I thought when I saw what had happened. Leaving the light on was clever, wasn't it ? "

" I suppose it was," said Dougal. " It suggested that the unknown visitor had come after dark when the light was necessary."

" Precisely. But the unknown visitor didn't come after dark. I should say they were there that afternoon."

Dougal said : " That's what I thought."

" Look, Inspector . . . if you know everything why ask me ? "

"I don't know everything," said Dougal. "I know very little. That's why I'm asking you. Maybe I'm just guessing. You must have done a bit of guessing yourself."

"You're telling me," said O'Day. "Well, I went into my office. I knew that Nellie Trundle would have left Needham's note in the drawer we call the whisky drawer—usually because there isn't any whisky in it. She'd have locked that drawer because she always does when she puts a note in there for me. Somebody had smashed the drawer open. They'd taken out the package which Needham had left, containing I take it his long letter and the packet of banknotes. They burned Needham's letter and, I imagine, put the banknotes in their pockets. Then they went away."

Dougal said: "Whoever it was came into the office knew that Needham had been there. They knew the letter was there. They knew the technique of the office."

"My guess is that it was Ralph Vanner," said O'Day. "He'd been on a jag, you know. Maybe he just came into the office and was nosing around."

Dougal said: "Do you think so? If Vanner had been on a five day jag why should he nose around and smash your drawer if he didn't know there was going to be something inside it? Perhaps you've some other reason for thinking it was Vanner."

O'Day nodded: "There was a note in the drawer—a typewritten note. Vanner always used the typewriter when he was cockeyed because no one could read his handwriting. The note told me politely he'd taken the seven hundred and fifty pounds and burned

the letter just to annoy me. He told me where I could get off."

Dougal said : " So this was Vanner being spiteful—just that ? "

" That's what it looks like," said O'Day.

There was a little silence ; then Dougal said : " It doesn't look like that to me, O'Day. I'll tell you why. When I went to your office early this morning I took the cigarette ash-tray in which this letter was burned away with me. No one's used that ash-tray since this happened. There were still some particles of ash in it. Whatever was burned in that ash-tray wasn't Needham's letter. Needham wrote his letter on the thick writing pad that Miss Trundle gave him. The paper burned in that ash-tray was some of her typewriter copying paper."

O'Day said : " This becomes more mysterious every moment, doesn't it ? Have you any theory about that, Inspector ? "

" Look," said Dougal, " I'm investigating a murder case. Some man's been murdered and it's my business to bring his murderer in if I can. You think I have some theory about this business. Well, I'll tell you what I think. I think you've got one too. You know the police never like to be tough with people who are trying to help them, but it's an offence in a case like this not to give information to a police officer if he's asking for it. You're sure you wouldn't like to talk to me, Mr. O'Day ? I'm a very reasonable person, you know."

O'Day said : " I can't tell you how much I enjoy talking to you. All I can do is to guess, and you're guessing very well. Just at the moment I'm trying to

work out why somebody should have wanted to burn some ashes of Nellie Trundle's carbon copy paper in the ash-tray just to make me believe they'd destroyed the letter. I wonder why Vanner would want to do a thing like that. It's extraordinary what drink will do to a man's mind, don't you agree?"

"No," said Dougal. "I don't. Do you know what I think?"

"I'd like to know. Tell me, Dougal?"

"Somebody knew that this Nicholas Needham was coming to your office to see you last Saturday morning, and that same person knew that you weren't there. That person knew the technique of the office. They knew that when Needham found that you weren't there he was going to leave a letter for you. They knew that Nellie Trundle would leave that note for you in the whisky drawer just in case you came back to the office over the week-end as you often do. The same person hangs about in the vicinity and sees Needham arrive. They see him leave. They see Nellie Trundle go out to have her coffee and buy her bottle of setting lotion. They see her go back to the office. They see her when she leaves the office just after one o'clock. Then they go up to the office; open the door with a key they've got; try to open the drawer; find they can't. So they smash it open. It was a very amateurish job. Whoever smashed that drawer open used much too much force, because it wasn't a very strong lock. Most men would have known that it could be quite easily forced.

"Anyhow,"—Dougal smiled dolefully—"this person opened the drawer; took out the Needham letter; probably read it; took it away. The note was left

for you in the drawer saying the money had been taken and the letter burned. Then two or three sheets of Miss Trundle's carbon copy paper were burned in the ash-tray to support the story. That was done to stop you trying to find where Needham's letter was. If you thought it was burned you wouldn't look for it. Then this very clever person leaves the office and because they know they're going to have an alibi that night they switch the light on before they go, just so that you shall think the job was done at night."

O'Day asked : "Have you any idea as to who this mysterious person was ?"

Dougal said : "Have you ?"

"How should I know ?" said O'Day.

"Quite. There isn't any way you would know, is there ?" Dougal went on : "Tell me something else, O'Day. You don't know to any great extent what Colonel Needham wanted you to do, but you do know a little about it, don't you ? You know he left seven hundred and fifty pounds and a long letter of instructions in your office. You haven't had the seven hundred and fifty and you haven't seen the letter of instructions. But you do know something. You know that the lady about whom Needham was concerned lives in Sussex. I suppose you wouldn't by any chance know who that lady is ? You haven't tried to find out ?"

O'Day said : "No, I haven't tried to find out."

Dougal got up. "Just one more question, Mr. O'Day. I suppose you wouldn't know where Mrs. Vanner is ?"

"How should I. Isn't she at her apartments ?"

Dougal shook his head. "It seems that she went

away suddenly last night. The last time we saw her we told her we'd like her to stay in town. It seems to me to be a very silly thing for her to have gone away like that. I didn't want to make this thing public. I don't want to have to find her. I could find her very easily, you know."

O'Day said : " Anybody knows that. England's a small country and the way you boys work you'd have her in twenty-four hours." He lighted a cigarette. " She'd know that too. You know, Merys Vanner's no fool."

" No," said Dougal. " She certainly isn't a fool. So you think she'll be back soon ? "

O'Day shrugged his shoulders. " How should I know ? I don't suppose she wants any publicity. I expect she's very upset about the death of her husband and all these enquiries. Maybe she wanted to be alone for a bit."

Dougal said : " I think that's a very possible solution. I think I'll leave her alone for twenty-four hours. I'll be on my way. Thanks for your help."

" I'm afraid I haven't been very much help, Dougal."

The detective officer smiled lugubriously. " Not an awful lot, but I'm certain you will be before we're through. Good night."

He picked up his hat and umbrella. He got to the doorway ; then he turned.

He said : " And thank you for the drink."

O'Day thought there was a touch of sarcasm in his voice.

When Dougal had gone, O'Day walked about the sitting-room, wondering about him. He felt that it

would be foolish to give Dougal too much rope ; first of all because he might have had Merys Vanner tailed. He *might* have. O'Day didn't think so, but you never knew with a man like Dougal. The second thing in his mind was that the Chief Detective-Inspector might want to talk to him again. And O'Day wanted to be there if Dougal did want to talk. His absence from town, he thought, combined with the sudden disappearance of Merys Vanner, might be grounds for even more suspicions in the police officer's mind.

At seven o'clock he went over to the garage ; got out his car ; drove to the Garter Inn at Goring. It was a miserable, rainy night and the old-fashioned inn, not far from the river, surrounded by a shield of dripping trees, seemed covered with an air of depression.

O'Day drove his car round to the back ; went through the side door. He went into the bar parlour. Behind the bar, busily engaged in wiping glasses, was a fat and jovial individual.

O'Day said : " Good evening, George." He ordered a whisky and soda. When it was served, he said : " Well, how's your guest, George ? Has she been behaving herself ? "

George grinned. " She's having a pretty lonely time. She's been in all day because the weather's been so bad. She couldn't go out anyway. There's no place for her to go to. She's a hell of a looker, isn't she, Mr. O'Day ? If I didn't know you, and if I was very curious, I might ask you what it was all about. But I'm not doing that. If you want to tell me you'll tell me, and if you don't you won't."

O'Day said : " Right, George." He finished his

drink. "I'll be seeing you. Where is she—in number one?"

George nodded. "I gave her the suite. There's nobody else in the place anyway."

"Maybe that's as well," said O'Day.

He went up the winding stairway; knocked on the door of number one. Her voice told him to come in. He opened the door and entered. The room was comfortably furnished. There was a fire burning. Round the walls the hunting prints gave the room an old-fashioned air. There were some bottles, glasses and a syphon on the carved oak sideboard.

Merys Vanner said: "Well, Terry, how's it going? Would you like a drink?" Her voice was subdued.

"Yes," said O'Day. "You look as if one might do you good. How're you feeling, Merys?"

"I feel all right, thank you very much." She stood, one arm on the mantelpiece, looking into the fire.

O'Day went to the sideboard; mixed himself a drink. He asked: "Are you having one?"

She shook her head.

O'Day said: "Too bad that you're feeling like that. You know what you look like to me?"

"No, what do I look like?"

"You're a very beautiful woman," said O'Day. "And I like that house-coat very much. I like the way your hair's done. You look a picture. Beyond that you might be a mackerel watching the approach of the fisherman's net, mightn't you?"

She said: "Yes? What fisherman and what net?"

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"A fisherman called Dougal. You know, that policeman's quite an astute person. He's been discovering all sorts of things, Merys."

She asked in a dull voice : "What things?"

"Well, one of them's very interesting," said O'Day. "Needham left a letter at my office with some money inside it. Somebody burned the letter and took the money. That's what I thought at first. I thought that Ralph had had the money and burned the letter to annoy me. And that was that. In point of fact a note was left in my drawer—typed, with the initials 'R.V.' on it—to tell me he'd done so."

She asked : "Do you blame him? And Ralph did go into the office that Saturday morning. I saw him. . . ."

O'Day interrupted. "That's as maybe. The point is Dougal's checked on the ashes that were left on the ash-tray—the cleaner had just emptied the ash-tray into the basket; she didn't clean it. He's discovered that the ashes on the ash-tray didn't come from the paper on which Needham wrote his letter."

She said : "So what . . . ?"

"It means," went on O'Day, "that somebody kept the letter. I've always been curious as to what was in that letter. It must have been something quite important. It must have been damned important for Nicky Needham to pay seven hundred and fifty pounds for me to do what he wanted done—the things he'd told me in that letter."

She repeated in a dull voice : "So what?"

"Just this. I want the letter. Give it to me, Merys."

She brought her hand down from the mantelpiece.

She spun round. "What the hell are you talking about?" She was as white as death.

O'Day said: "Take the weight off your feet and sit down. I'll tell you what I'm talking about. I've spent a lot of time thinking about you; trying to connect this and that; trying to add up two and two without making five of it. I think I've done it. I'm going to tell you a little story. See how you like it."

She sat down in the armchair. She leaned back; rested her head on the cushion. She said: "Go on, Terry. I like hearing stories."

"Four or five weeks ago," said O'Day, "Needham, who'd been at Mallowfield in the war; who'd grown very fond of Mrs. Deane; who'd proposed to her and been turned down; went down there to see her. He wanted to see her because he thought there might be just a chance that she'd changed her mind about him. She hadn't. She told him so. More than that she told him that there was no hope for him because she was engaged to be married to a man called Pavin."

"Needham didn't like that. He didn't like it at all. Because he knew plenty about this Pavin. He thought he was a bad type. He didn't say too much about that to Mrs. Deane, because he expected she'd put it down to jealousy. He tried to persuade her against this marriage, but she thought he was merely being jealous, so Needham gave it up and came up to town. This would be three or four weeks ago. He was dispirited; down. He was so unhappy that he was prepared to do anything at all, and just at this moment he ran into a very attractive and charming woman"—O'Day grinned—"a Mrs. Merys Vanner. Remember, Merys?"

She said nothing.

"Strangely enough," O'Day continued, "she wasn't too happy either at the time. For a long time she'd been making a play for her husband's partner—me. But he wasn't playing. She didn't like that; she didn't like her husband; she didn't like anything. But she was, as I have told you, a very attractive woman. So she put the fluence on Nicky Needham, and, being a man who wasn't used to dealing with such an alluring person as she was, he not only fell for her; he also talked to her.

"Now Mrs. Merys Vanner is a very astute woman. And she got to work on Nicholas Needham so effectively that he agreed to spend a night or two with her at the Sable Inn at Totnes. They were only there one night, and it was all very carefully laid on. But she got what she wanted out of him. She got the whole story—the story of Pavin, his background, and what he was trying to do to Mrs. Deane. How am I doing, Merys?"

She said in a flat voice: "I think it's a very interesting *story*."

"You haven't heard anything yet," said O'Day. "Needham said that he was going away in a week or two to Africa, but he didn't like the situation being left where it was. He hated the thought of going away and Mrs. Deane being left to the tender mercies of Pavin, and he told this woman—this Merys Vanner—that his plan was to go and see some reputable private detective; to commission him to check up on the Pavin facts and look after Mrs. Deane.

"By this time Merys Vanner had made her own plans. She proposed to deal with the situation herself

and she didn't want Needham talking to private detectives. Somehow he had to be headed off. So she thought of a very good idea. She said that *she* knew the man to go to; that he wasn't in London at the moment but would be back some time before the end of the month. She said she knew this man very well; that he was trustworthy and reliable and that when Needham was away she would see that he did what he was paid to do. Do you still like it, Merys?" O'Day grinned at her.

"It's very dramatic." She smiled cynically. "I'd like to hear some more."

"You shall. This Merys Vanner was clever. She didn't tell Needham the name of the detective she was going to send him to. But you know his name and so do I. It was a man called Terence O'Day. Now Needham felt very much better. He didn't mind the idea of going away so much. From time to time he got in touch with Mrs. Merys Vanner and asked her if the detective was back in London yet. She always said no, but not to worry because he certainly would be back before Needham left."

"And," said O'Day with a smile, "she knew that this detective—this Terence O'Day—never went to his office on a Saturday morning. So on the Friday, when Needham was getting very impatient, she telephoned him and told him the name of the detective and his office address. She said that she expected he would be back in his office on Saturday morning; that in any event if he was not there then he'd be there on the Monday. She said as Needham had to leave on Saturday evening, if O'Day wasn't there it would be all right for Needham to leave a sealed letter

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of instructions, with his fee, so that O'Day would get it when he did return. And early on Saturday morning Mrs. Vanner rang up the office to make certain that O'Day wasn't there. She was relieved to hear that his secretary wasn't even certain when he'd be back.

"Needham arrived about ten-thirty. He asked for O'Day; was told that he wasn't there. So he wrote his letter. He wrote the letter on a correspondence pad given him by O'Day's secretary. He did this in the waiting-room. He put the sheets of paper in a large envelope with seven hundred and fifty pounds in notes. Then he left. It was rather unfortunate," said O'Day with another grin, "that Mrs. Merys Vanner didn't know that late that afternoon he took the trouble to leave a note at O'Day's apartment.

"I imagine that Mrs. Merys Vanner kept a very close observation on O'Day's office on Saturday morning—probably from a car parked on the other side of the road. She saw Needham arrive; she saw him leave some time afterwards. She knew he'd have written the letter. A little while after that she saw Miss Trundle, the secretary, come out of the office building. She didn't like that because it wasn't the right time for her to leave, so she still waited. And that was probably when she saw Ralph go into the office. He must have read that letter; put it into another envelope; gone away. Then Merys Vanner saw Miss Trundle return and leave the office again just after one o'clock. I'm not guessing badly, am I, Merys?"

She said: "Go on." She was looking into the fire.

"Mrs. Vanner went up to the office," went on

O'Day. "She opened the door with a key she'd got from her husband some time or other ; went in. She knew that Miss Trundle would leave the letter in the locked drawer of O'Day's desk. So she broke it open. You know, I always thought a woman had broken the drawer open. So does Dougal. A man wouldn't have used half that force ; he'd know the lock was *easily* smashed. Then she took out the Needham letter ; tore open the envelope ; extracted the money ; looked at the letter and put the whole lot in her handbag.

"Then she went into the outer office ; took two or three sheets of copying paper from Miss Trundle's desk ; burned them in the ash-tray on O'Day's desk. She typed out a note purporting to come from her husband, saying that he'd taken the money and burned the letter. She left the note in the broken drawer. Then she went off, but being a *very* clever woman," said O'Day with a wry smile, "she switched on the light in the outer office so as to plant in somebody's mind the idea that whoever had been in the office and done all this had done it after dark at a time when *she* was going to be at the Splendide Hotel at Eastbourne. Do you still like it, Merys ?"

She shrugged her shoulders. She said nothing.

O'Day continued : "Between the time she heard the story from Needham at the Sable Inn and the time when she stole the letter from O'Day's drawer, she'd been putting in a lot of work. I told you she was a very astute woman ; that she loved money ; that she was in a jam. She was in a jam because her husband was not working. He was drinking heavily because of something she'd told him about herself

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and the man O'Day. So she had to think of her future. Do you know what she'd been doing in the meantime?"

Merys Vanner said in the same flat voice: "You tell me what she'd been doing, Terry."

"After the Sable Inn episode, when she heard Needham's story about Pavin, she went down to Sussex. She wanted to meet Mr. Pavin. So she met him. She went down there with the idea of black-mailing Pavin, and believe me she had something on him. But Pavin was no fool either. I can make several guesses about what happened during the next week or so, but my chief guess is this: Pavin, they tell me, is a very good-looking and attractive man. I think that, having been rebuffed by O'Day, and not liking her husband, Mrs. Merys Vanner was all out for a very good-looking and attractive man on whom she had something. Pavin suggested to her that it would be very much easier for them if they worked together. And that is why she afterwards kept the letter—the Needham letter that she'd taken from O'Day's drawer. I think," said O'Day, "that a woman as astute as she was wouldn't destroy that letter. She'd keep it just so that she'd always have something on Pavin if he didn't behave himself. How am I doing, Merys?"

She laughed suddenly—a high-pitched laugh. "Believe it or not, Terry, you're not doing so badly."

"Now," said O'Day, "a little complication arises. This Mrs. Merys Vanner had told her husband that she'd spent a night with O'Day at the Sable Inn. She thought she'd been very clever about that, but she hadn't been clever enough. Her husband asked a

private detective to go down there and check on the facts because he was considering bringing a divorce petition. But the detective didn't like the job and wouldn't do it. So Vanner went down himself. While he was down there he came across the young man who'd serviced Needham's car. She thought that nobody had seen Needham; that she'd got away with it, having put O'Day's name in the registration book. But somebody had seen Needham. The young man at the garage had. He was able to tell Vanner what sort of man had stayed with Mrs. Vanner. So Vanner knew that his wife was a liar. He knew that I hadn't stayed there with her. So he became very interested in her movements."

She looked up suddenly. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean this," said O'Day. "He employed a private detective called George Bale to watch his wife. When she went down to Sussex she had Bale after her the whole time. Bale saw her meetings with Pavin, and Bale came back and reported to Vanner, who began to wonder exactly what his wife was at. By this time I don't think he was liking her very much. He made up his mind that he'd got to do two things. First of all he'd got to find out what his wife was doing with this man Pavin, whom he no doubt suspected of being her lover, which he probably was. And the second thing he had to do was to clear up this matter between himself and his partner O'Day. He realised that his suspicions of O'Day had been wrong and, being fundamentally a decent man, he wanted to do something about it. But he proposed to leave this second matter until he'd seen Pavin."

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She said in a low voice : " I see . . . You know that . . . ? "

O'Day said : " I know plenty, and what I don't know I can guess. After Vanner read that letter in the office he knew all about it. He didn't want to see Pavin anywhere where the meeting might be observed, so he made an appointment with him at the Palissade Club last Wednesday night. This must have been a shock to Pavin. Imagine what a shock it must have been when Ralph Vanner came through on the telephone and told him he wanted to see him to ask him a few questions about himself and Merys Vanner. Pavin did the obvious thing. He got in touch with the woman. He asked her what was going on. He asked her if she'd talked to Vanner. She said no ; she didn't understand it. But was she scared ? She suggested that the best thing for Pavin to do was to go and keep the appointment to find out what Vanner knew. Things might have been easier for her," O'Day went on, " if she'd known that her husband had by this time discovered the falsity of the Sable Inn story. But she didn't know that. She thought he still believed it.

" The appointment was made for Pavin to meet Vanner at the Palissade after dark, somewhere about ten o'clock, I should think," said O'Day. " So in order to strengthen her story about O'Day, whom she knew was looking for her husband, she told Mabel Bonaventura at the Pimento Club that her husband would be at the Palissade at twelve o'clock on Wednesday night. She knew that O'Day would go down there because he wanted to see Vanner, and she knew the interview between Vanner and Pavin would be over

by that time and they would be gone. So she laid on a couple of toughs to beat up O'Day, taking good care that they should get him from behind so that he wouldn't recognise them. It could then be established that O'Day had gone down to the Palissade to meet Vanner and got a good hiding at the hands of this outraged husband or from somebody employed by him. It was a damned good story. The police fell for it. If I hadn't been able to kick the bottom out of that Sable Inn story I should be number one suspect to-day. That was what you wanted, wasn't it, sweetheart ? "

She said nothing. She was still looking into the fire.

O'Day took out his cigarette case ; lighted a cigarette. He drank a little whisky. He went on : " I wish I'd been a fly on the wall at that interview between Vanner and Pavin last Wednesday night. It must have been an amusing situation. Here was Pavin trying to pump Vanner to find out how much he knew ; Vanner, who knew all about Pavin from the Needham letter, trying to get at the facts of what had gone on between his wife and Pavin. Anyhow, when the meeting was over, they separated. I have an idea that Vanner told Pavin before he left that he was going to call a meeting the next night—a meeting between O'Day, Pavin, Merys Vanner and himself. You know why ? "

She asked : " Why ? " .

" Isn't it sticking out a foot ? Vanner was keen on his wife. He was in love with her. *You* wouldn't know what that means, but he was. He was shocked and disgusted at what she'd been doing, but he still felt he must do his best to try and keep her out of any

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trouble. The whole story was going to be produced in front of O'Day, and Vanner was probably going to ask O'Day what was the way out and to apologise to him for his suspicions. So Pavin got through to you and told you that, and neither of you liked it very much, did you ?

"Vanner would know that he'd left the Needham letter and the money on Miss Trundle's desk. It was going to be plain to him that it was his wife who had taken it ; that it was she who had left the note for me in the drawer with his initials on it." Vanner was going to ask for that letter and he was going to ask for the money, and Mrs. Vanner and Mr. Pavin were going to find themselves in a hell of a spot with a threat held over their heads that if they didn't play ball O'Day or Vanner, or both of them, would go to the police. A nice little job, wasn't it, Merys. So you had to do something about it."

She asked : "So what did I do ? I think your story is quite devastating, Terry. The only thing is I wonder if you can prove it. It's a very circumstantial story, isn't it ?"

O'Day said : "It's good enough for me. I think that Mrs. Merys Vanner must by this time have acquired a great fondness for Mr. Pavin. A hell of a pair those two. Definitely comrades in arms, in more senses than one. However, Pavin had agreed to the meeting and I imagine the next morning Vanner telephoned his wife and told her to be at the office at ten o'clock. He instructed Miss Trundle to get in touch with O'Day and ask him to be there too. But neither Mrs. Vanner nor Pavin intended to keep that appointment, and by this time Mrs. Vanner's very

fertile brain had got to work. She told Vanner that the appointment had been changed ; that the parties were to meet at the Palissade Club. Now that was reasonable enough, wasn't it ? Because that was the place where the first meeting between Pavin and Vanner had taken place. Then she telephoned O'Day at the office and told him Vanner wanted him to go to the Palissade at twelve o'clock.

" But Mrs. Vanner didn't keep the appointment because her story was that she was scared at the meeting that was going to take place between her husband and O'Day. Of course O'Day didn't know that Pavin was to be there. And I take it that the time for *that* meeting was about eleven. When O'Day arrived there at midnight, and was looking around the place, Mrs. Vanner, with a first-class alibi in her flat at St. John's Wood, telephoned to the Palissade to establish the fact that O'Day *was* there. He told her over the telephone that her husband had not arrived.

" After the telephone call he found her husband dead. I can give you five guesses as to who killed him. The person who killed him was the person who *had* to shut his mouth. The only question that concerns you, Merys, is *whether you knew he was going to kill Ralph Vanner*. If you did, you know what they'll do to you ? "

She said : " This is rubbish. No one could prove that Pavin was there. You never saw him. He never went there. There's only one person could have killed Ralph and that was you."

" Nuts . . . ! " said O'Day. " I had no reason to. If I'd met him he'd probably have apologised to me."

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"You can say what you like," she said. "No one could prove that Pavin was there."

"All right," said O'Day. "Have it your way."

"It's going to be my way. You can't bring these accusations without evidence, and you know it. You ought to know the law; you're a private detective. There's no evidence."

O'Day said: "More nuts! Last night I took two diamond and emerald clips from you. I know where they came from. They came from Mrs. Lauretta Deane and I know how you got them. Pavin got them from her and gave them to you. That was part of your joint blackmail scheme. But my piece of evidence about Ralph is even more interesting. When I found him slumped over the table, there was something under the table which nobody knows about. The police certainly don't. They don't know about it because I picked it up. It was a diamond and emerald bracelet belonging to Mrs. Deane. It was part of the set which included the clips which you wore last night. You got that from Pavin too."

She said: "If I got it from Pavin how could it be there at the Palissade?"

O'Day grinned. "Pavin took it back from you in case he could buy Vanner's silence; in case he could persuade him to keep his mouth shut. My guess is he gave the bracelet to Vanner and Vanner threw it on the floor. It went under the table. Then, when Pavin hit him and killed him, he was a little too excited to think about it. He could hear my footsteps in the house or just outside. All he wanted to do was to get out. So he got out. He left the bracelet behind."

O'Day drew on his cigarette. "So there's only one interesting point left."

"And what's that, Terry? What is this interesting point?" Her voice was unsteady.

"The point is whether you *knew* what Pavin was going to do when he went to the Palissade. If you did; they'll probably hang you by that good-looking neck of yours until you are dead, and personally I think they'd be justified."

She looked at him; her eyes were bright—too bright.

"Damn you, Terry . . . !"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I very nearly was damned too—by you. I want the letter. Give it to me. You wouldn't leave it in your apartment at St. John's Wood. You'd bring it down here with you. My bet is it's in your handbag. You can do one of two things. Give me that letter or I'll turn you in, and if I turn you in it's on a charge of being accessory to your husband's murder. You do exactly what you like. I'll give you one minute to decide."

She got up from the chair. She stood facing him, her eyes blazing. For a moment O'Day thought she was going to fling herself at him.

He said: "Take it easy, baby. There's been enough tough stuff already, you know."

Her arms dropped limply to her sides. She went into the bedroom. When she came back the letter was in her hand. She gave it to him.

O'Day unfolded the letter; looked through the sheets. He said: "Well, it looks as if it's all here." He put it in his pocket. "What about the money, Merys? I'd like that too . . . all of it."

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She called him something—not a very nice name. Then she went into the bedroom. She came back with a packet of bank-notes. She held them out to him. O'Day put them in his pocket.

He smiled at her. "So long, Merys. . . . And I hope it keeps fine for you ! "

III

O'Day walked slowly up Sloane Street towards Sloane Square. He looked at his strap-watch. It was five o'clock. He thought that if Dougal hadn't tried to get in touch with him by the time he got back to his apartment he would have to do something. He thought that whilst Dougal was around the place asking you questions, trying to add things up, you were fairly safe, but when Dougal was quiet and you didn't know what he was doing it could be very dangerous—too dangerous.

When he went into his apartment block he said to the hall-porter :

"Any telephone calls, Simmons ? "

Simmons shook his head. "Nothing at all, sir."

O'Day went up in the lift. He switched on the electric fire in his sitting-room ; sat down in front of it. He lighted a cigarette. He sat there for twenty minutes, thinking—thinking about the happenings of the last week. He got up ; went to the desk in the corner of the room ; unlocked a drawer ; took out Needham's letter. He went back to his armchair. He read the letter. It said :

" Dear Terence O'Day,

" I expect you have some recollection of me, no matter how vague it may be. Anyway, back in the States during the war years, I was able on one occasion at least to make things a little easier for you. Do you remember? I hope you will because now I want you to do something for me.

" I came to your office this morning because I was told there was a chance that you might be there, but in any event if you weren't there I could leave this letter for you; that I could rely on you dealing with the situation. Unfortunately, I have to leave tonight for Africa, and the nature of my business abroad does not permit me to give you an address. So I am writing this letter and I will leave an additional note at your apartment so that if you get back tomorrow, Sunday, you will know that this letter is waiting for you in your office. Maybe you'll come down here at once and deal with it because it's urgent and important so far as I am concerned.

" I don't think you are going to have a lot of difficulty in dealing with this job, especially after you've read the information I have to give you, but it is a thing that will require delicate handling and although I don't know a great deal about your methods of work I have been given to understand that you are the man for the job.

" Here are the facts: For the greater part of the war I was the executive commanding officer at the Parachute School at Mallowfield—an estate in Sussex. The house was occupied originally by a Mrs. Lauretta Deane, but the War Office took it over to be used as a more or less secret parachute school during the war, and Mrs. Deane contented herself with living at the Dowry House on the other side of the estate.

" Mrs. Deane was a very charming, kind and attractive

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woman. You can imagine there was not a great deal of fun for any of us—either the instructors, officers in charge of the different departments or the military personnel who were being trained at the school. They were allowed very little leave. There were stringent security measures. But Mrs. Deane managed to make life a great deal happier for all of us. She threw parties; she did all sorts of things to relieve the monotony of our lives.

“I saw a great deal of her because she invariably organised her parties with my help, and also because I grew very attached to her. In point of fact within a few months I was head over heels in love with her. I am not a man who is particularly interested in women except for an occasional affair which doesn't usually last long, and I suppose it was for this reason that when I fell for Mrs. Deane I fell the hard way. To me she was the only person in the world.

“Eventually, I proposed to her, and she turned me down. She considered me to be quite a friend in the best sense of the word, but she had no love for me in the other sort of way, and so that was that!

“At the end of the war the school closed and I went back to the States, where I continued with my interrupted work on the Intelligence Staff. Some weeks ago I came to England. I thought that the passing of time might possibly have changed Mrs. Deane's mind. Anyway, I thought there was no harm in trying again. So I telephoned her and she asked me down to Mallowfield, where she was still living in the Dower House because, apparently, it costs a lot of money to keep the main house going.

“I went down there and saw her. I asked her if there was any possibility of her changing her mind. She said no, and I suppose in order to let me know that it would be a good thing for me to give up all hope she told me that she

was engaged to another man ; that they were to be married shortly. This man's name was George Edward Pavin. And when I heard it it rang a bell in my mind. I remembered the name vaguely and I also remembered that there were some implications about it which weren't very nice. But I said nothing. I stayed for a meal and returned to London after a promise that I would go down there again.

"I came back to London ; got into touch with our people in the States on the telephone and received information from them which confirmed my suspicions. George Edward Pavin, apparently a good-looking, well-educated Englishman, was not even English. He was a Frenchman who spoke English perfectly and a couple of other languages, and during the war he was a known collaborator with the Germans. He worked for them against the allies. How he got away with it I don't know. Apparently there was not sufficient evidence against him—he'd been too clever—to bring him to trial at the end of the war.

"Then I flew over to France and began a systematic research into George Edward Pavin and I discovered something which appalled me.

"Pavin was a close associate of a very rich and, on the surface, not unattractive South American—one Alphonse d'Escarte. The interesting thing was that this Alphonse d'Escarte was Mrs. Lauretta Deane's husband whom she divorced in Paris some two years before the war. d'Escarte was, for financial reasons, given the custody of his wife's daughter after the divorce proceedings. It was thought better for her because her health was not good, that she should live in France, but within a year her health was so bad that Mrs. Deane was informed that her daughter had become an inmate of a mental home. Everything seemed to be in order, but it wasn't.

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"This girl, who is as sane as you or I, has been kept a prisoner in this home—the address of which is enclosed in this letter on a separate sheet of paper. And this process has been carried on for a specific reason, which was this : Under the settlement made by the French Courts, d'Escarte, who is a very rich man, is forced to pay a large income to Mrs. Deane (this is her maiden name which she used after the divorce), and he hated her. d'Escarte is a man of sadistic mentality. He loathed her for having divorced him and made up his mind to get back on her by any means in his power, his first step being, through bribery or some other method, to get her daughter—a young girl—put into this mad-house, where unless somebody deals with it I should think she would eventually go mad.

"I was very naturally interested to know what was behind all this. I felt this was only a part of some scheme. Then I discovered that there was a very close contact between d'Escarte and Pavin—Pavin who was now engaged to be married to Mrs. Lauretta Deane. I looked for the answer and I found it."

"During and ever since the war Pavin has been a professional blackmailer, and there is no doubt in my mind that the situation is this : In the settlement under which Mrs. Deane draws her allowance—a considerable one—she loses this allowance if she re-marries. It is therefore obvious to me what has happened. Pavin has come over to England, made her acquaintance—he is passing as a man of considerable means and he is being supplied with ample funds by d'Escarte. The idea is that if Mrs. Deane consents to marry him he will, by some means or other, arrange the freeing of her daughter from the control of her father ; will get her out of the mental home and will bring her to England.

"These are the reasons why Mrs. Deane, who adores her child, and has worried about her for years, has consented to marry Pavin. After they are married—and this is the main idea in the sadistic mind of d'Escarte—she will discover that Pavin has no money; that by marrying him she has sacrificed her income; that she will be even less able to help her daughter.

"If you know anything about women you will understand how easy in these circumstances it has been for the good-looking and attractive Pavin quietly to force Mrs. Deane into a frame of mind in which she has consented to marry him.

"At the moment, having regard to my own job which is top secret, it is impossible for me to divulge to Mrs. Deane or anyone else the sources from which I obtained my information. When I returned from France about a month ago I went again to Mallowfield. I saw Mrs. Deane and endeavoured without giving anything away to talk her out of marrying Pavin. I told her that I'd met him; that I disliked him. I said everything I could without telling her the truth, which I thought would make her more unhappy than ever. But it was useless. I think she thought I was just being jealous.

"Soon after this, when I had received orders for the job on which I am now engaged, I made up my mind that I would like to put this matter in the hands of a responsible private investigator—someone who could check on these facts and from his knowledge tell Mrs. Deane the truth, and deal with Pavin.

"I met somebody who said they knew of one, but that he was away and when he returned to London they would communicate with me. It was only yesterday that I was telephoned and told that you might be back today, and

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given your name. I was intrigued and pleased because I remembered you from the old days in America and my memory of you was that you were the sort of man I would like to do this job.

" I think it is quite unlikely that I shall be able to see you before I leave tonight, although I shall ask your secretary for the address of your apartment and go there this afternoon.

" What I want you to do is this : To see Pavin ; to let Pavin know that you know everything about him ; to let him know that you know what his game is ; to break up this thing between Mrs. Deane and him at any cost ; to confront him with her to say what you know about him ; to let her know what she is walking into. I cannot do this myself, for the reasons which I have stated and because time is pressing.

" I am enclosing herewith £750 in English notes. I think this will be enough for your expenses, and for a fee for yourself. I have a feeling that you will handle this for me, and I have a feeling that you will stick to it until you've done the job. I wish I could leave an address where you could get in touch with me. I can't. The job I'm on at the moment might be dangerous. It might not be. It may be that within a few weeks I shall be back in England. The chances are just as great that I shan't be ! I know you will understand what I mean.

" Good luck to you, O'Day. I have a feeling that if you take this job on you won't regret it. I have a feeling that you will take it on ; that you will pull it off. Once again, good luck.

" Sincerely,

" Nicholas Needham."

O'Day folded up the letter ; put it in the breast

pocket of his jacket. He thought as a document it was interesting ; that it would be very interesting to Chief Detective-Inspector Dougal. He thought, however, that it was entirely unnecessary that that individual should even see it.

He looked at his watch. It was six o'clock. He walked over to the telephone ; dialled Mabel Bonaventura's number.

When she came on the line he said : " Listen, Mabel . . . how would you like to put on your hat and come round here ? I want to talk to you."

She said : " O.K. Do I have to make any more visits to the country ? "

" I don't think so. I think you've very nearly finished your job of work for me."

She said : " I'll come right round."

O'Day hung up. He lighted a cigarette ; began to walk about the sitting-room. He thought he knew exactly what he was going to do.

Miss Bonaventura arrived after a lapse of twenty minutes. She wore a new hat ; a demure expression.

O'Day said : " You look very nice, Mabel. When I look at you I always think of the word ' chic.' "

" Oh, yes ? Are you trying to start something ? "

O'Day shook his head. " I'm trying to finish something. Now, listen. This is important, so we don't want any slip-ups. The position at the moment is this ; our friend Pavin is expecting to hear from Mrs. Williams. So you're going to be Mrs. Williams. Tomorrow morning you ring up the Splendide Hotel at Eastbourne. You ask for Pavin. You tell him you are Mrs. Williams. You say that you've had a little talk with a mutual friend—Mrs. Vanner ; that the

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situation is a little difficult so far as she is concerned at the moment, but that your husband, Mr. Williams, will be coming down to Eastbourne tomorrow in the late afternoon or evening, and would very much like to see Mr. Pavin. I think you'll find he'll agree to that. He'll have to. You understand that?"

She nodded. "I've got it."

"The next thing," O'Day went on, "tomorrow morning you're going to develop a fit of nerves, Mabel. You've been worrying about this Vanner murder, understand? You've been worrying about it ever since Chief Detective-Inspector Dougal came to see you at the Pimento Club and asked you all those questions. Do you think you can look as if you were worried?"

"That's easy," said Mabel. "I've often been worried and I remember how I look."

He said: "I think you're a great actress. So tomorrow morning you go down to Scotland Yard. You ask to see Chief Detective-Inspector Dougal. You tell him you've been worried. He'll want to know why. Then you say that you've been worried about me; that after he'd seen you I came to the club and talked to you; that I wanted to know everything he'd said to you; that I wanted to know everything about it. I think you'll find that Dougal will ask you if you know whether by any chance during the last week or so I've been interested in any person whose name I might have mentioned to you—not Merys Vanner or Ralph Vanner, but somebody else. He'll be awfully keen to try and find out the name of some man who is associated with Merys Vanner. You won't know anything about that. You'll say you

haven't the remotest notion what he's talking about ; that you've never heard me mention the name of any man in connection with the Vanner case.

" But just when you're going ; when he's finished talking to you—and he'll try and pump you to see if there's anything else you know ; you'll tell him that you met me in the street this evening ; that I told you in conversation that I was going to Eastbourne ; that I was going to the Splendide Hotel. You got that ? "

She said : " I understand. Is that all ? "

" Yes, that's all. Except there's some money for you, Mabel. You've been very useful." He went to his desk in the corner of the room ; opened a drawer ; came back with a packet of bank-notes.

She said : " My God . . . I've never seen so much money ! How much is this ? "

" It's the balance of the seventy-five I promised you, plus an extra twenty-five for being a good girl."

" Thanks, Terry?" She looked at him. She went on : " So this is the pay-off. Now I'm going to stop being a private detective's assistant."

He said : " You'd be pretty careful, wouldn't you, Mabel, about the instructions I've just given you ? "

" I'll be careful all right. This is what I'm to do. . . ." She repeated what he'd told her.

He said : " That's fine. Whatever you do see that Dougal understands that I'm going to Eastbourne to the Splendide tomorrow afternoon."

" O.K. . . ." She was half-way to the door when she stopped and turned. " Look . . . you're not running yourself into anything, are you ? "

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O'Day grinned at her. "What do you mean by that one?"

She said: "I don't know. . . . But last night I was thinking. I was thinking it would be very funny if this egg Pavin was the boy Dougal was looking for."

O'Day said: "It would be very funny. But it's a good idea for girls like you not to think too much."

"Well, I was only wondering. So long, Terry. I'll be seeing you." She went out.

O'Day went back to his chair by the fire. He took Needham's letter out of his pocket; began to read it again.

IV

At eleven o'clock on Tuesday morning the Assistant Commissioner came into Dougal's office. Dougal was sitting at his desk smoking a short briar pipe, trying to work out *The Times* cross-word puzzle.

Grogan said: "Have you ever finished one of those things, Dougal?"

Dougal shook his head. He said solemnly: "I don't think a day passes, except Sundays, when I don't have a go at this thing, but there's always something trips me up. One of these fine days I'll get one out." He pushed the folded newspaper to one side.

Grogan asked: "How's the Vanner thing doing? Did you read the newspapers yesterday?"

Dougal nodded. "One of them was a little bit sarcastic about us, I think, sir. They said England

was a small place and a week a long time for finding a murderer." He smiled. "Really it's not a long time when there's not very much to work on."

Grogan sat down in the chair opposite Dougal. He said: "You're not telling me you've got nothing to work on?"

Dougal shook his head. "I've got quite a lot to work on, sir, but I can't do anything very much. It's all very well making guesses, but I like facts, and you can't hang a man on guesses, if you know what I mean."

The other nodded. "I know what you mean. You have some idea but you can't find any supporting facts. Is that it?"

Dougal got up. He walked over to the window; sat sideways on the low ledge; looked out of the window.

He said: "It's not exactly that, sir. I feel we're getting somewhere slowly. When this thing started we had, I thought—and I believe you did—a good case against O'Day. That's fallen to the ground. There's quite some evidence but it means nothing. O'Day went to see Vanner twice—on the Wednesday night when he was knocked about, and on the Thursday when Vanner was killed. We know that and O'Day admits it. In normal circumstances, if Merys Vanner's story about O'Day having stayed with her at the Sable Inn was true, we might have got a conviction. But it isn't true, and the jury would have to be told about that. The whole motive of O'Day's being up against Vanner disappears, and suspicions shift to Merys Vanner. The funny thing is that she tried to frame him. We know that."

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Grogan asked : " Why is it funny ? "

Dougal got up from the window ledge. " O'Day's been seeing her. I've had a tail on them both ever since this thing started. You know, sir, I always believe in giving people plenty of rope. O'Day went to see her last Saturday night in her apartment in St. John's Wood. He was there for about a quarter of an hour. He came out and drove away. He returned three quarters of an hour afterwards. He picked her up. She came out of the place with a suitcase ; got into O'Day's car. He took her down to an inn near Goring—the Garter Inn. She was there all day Sunday. She didn't go out.

" O'Day went down there on Sunday evening. He was there for quite a while. Then he drove back home. She left yesterday morning."

Grogan asked : " Where did she go to ? "

" She went back to her flat."

The Assistant Commissioner lighted a cigarette. " You don't by any chance think that there was or is something on between O'Day and Merys Vanner ? "

Dougal shook his head.

" Well, if there's nothing on between them, what's all this funny business about ? " asked Grogan.

Dougal said : " I'll tell you what I think, sir. And please remember I'm only guessing. The letter that Needham left for O'Day at his office . . . you know, that letter wasn't burned ; somebody merely pretended to burn it. I think that somebody was Merys Vanner. I'd like to have a look at that letter. I think it would be a very interesting document. I think O'Day wanted to have a look at it too. Remember it was written to

him. O'Day would be even more interested than I am as to what was in it. I think that was his means of getting it."

"What do you mean?" asked Grogan.

"Look, sir . . . supposing Merys Vanner had that letter. If it was good enough for her to pretend that she had burned it in order that she could keep it, that letter was important—important to her I mean. So she wouldn't destroy it. She'd keep it with her. It was probably in her apartment at St. John's Wood. See what I mean?"

"No, not exactly. What *do* you mean?"

Dougal said: "It's an old trick, sir." He smiled. For a moment his lugubrious face lighted up. He went on: "I should think last Saturday night O'Day went to see Merys Vanner to throw a scare into her. He probably told her he'd been talking to me. He probably told her I'd been down to the Sable Inn and confirmed the story he'd told me. I should think he said that the confirmation of his story would practically clear him in my mind, but it would concentrate suspicion on her. I think O'Day had something on her. He probably told her the best thing she could do would be to get out of town for a day or two. He'd make up something to support that." He smiled again wryly. "I should say he had a very good imagination. So she got scared. O'Day came back and took her down to the Garter Inn because he knew that she'd take that letter with her. He knew that when he went down to see her on Sunday, if he couldn't get the letter out of her by persuasion he'd get it by force. He knew it was either in her handbag or somewhere about her person. He'd made up his

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mind to get it, and when he got it, he got into his car and drove away and left her there."

* The Assistant Commissioner nodded. "That's reasonable. But what's all this about? What's O'Day trying to do? Supposing he's got his letter? What's he going to do with it?"

Dougal shrugged his shoulders. "I haven't any idea, sir. But he's going to do one of two things. He's either going to bring that letter to me, because it's obviously got some bearing on this murder, or he's not. If he doesn't bring the letter to me he's going to do something about it." He knocked his pipe out into the glass bowl on his desk. "This O'Day is a very consistent person, sir. Very consistent. Remember that in the note that Needham left for him at his apartment he talked about this lady in Sussex. I should think that O'Day would be very curious about that business. If he's got the original letter he's going to do something about it. He's going to have two reasons for doing this. One is that he wants to clear himself absolutely in our minds. The second reason is that he probably wants to earn the money that Needham left with that note, if he can."

Grogan got up. "Well, I wish you luck. What are you going to do?"

"I'm not going to do anything," said Dougal. "I'm just going to sit down here and go on trying to work out this cross-word puzzle. If O'Day's doing what I think he's doing, he's going to need me sometime, and when that time arrives he'll either show up or get into touch with me."

Grogan said: "I hope you're right. Come and see me tomorrow."

"I'll do that, sir. I hope I'll have some better news for you."

Grogan went out.

The Detective-Constable who 'carried the bag for Dougal' came into the office.

He said: "Martin's just been through, sir. He says that last evening about twenty past six, Mabel Bonaventura—the girl you saw at the Pimento Club—went round to O'Day's apartment. She was there about twenty minutes."

Dougal nodded. "What did she do then?"

"Martin says she went straight back to her flat. She was there until half an hour ago; then she came out. She took a cab and he says he's lost her. He says the traffic was a bit too thick for him."

"That's a pity," said Dougal. "I'd have liked to have known where she was going. All right, Smith."

The Detective-Constable went out of the office.

The telephone on Dougal's desk jangled. He picked up the receiver. A voice said: "There's a Miss Bonaventura downstairs. She's asking to see you, sir."

Dougal grinned. "Bring her up."

He was waiting outside his door in the corridor when she arrived. His face broke into one of its rare smiles.

He said: "Well, lassie, so you thought you'd like to come and talk to me?" He led the way into the office; closed the door. "Sit down and make yourself comfortable."

She said: "Thank you. I wanted to talk to you, Mr. Dougal. I felt I ought to. I'm getting a little frightened, if you know what I mean."

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Dougal went behind his desk. He produced his pipe ; began to fill it. " I know what you mean, lassie. I'm rather glad. You know, when people get frightened they talk."

Mabel thought : Sez you . . . !

He went on : " Now tell me all about it. Tell me what happened when you went to see Mr. O'Day last night at his apartment. Tell me why you went there, Mabel." He lighted his pipe.

For a moment Miss Bonaventura was silent. She thought : He's pretty hot, this old egg. So he's been having me watched. Her quick brain took the obvious way out.

She said : " I went round there because he telephoned for me. He knew you'd been to see me at the club. He wanted to know the questions you asked me. He wanted to see me last night because he wanted to know if you'd been at me any more."

She went on glibly, doing her stuff. . . .

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O'Day stopped the car at the side of the main road twenty yards from the gate that led to the Dower House. He got out ; began to walk towards the gate. As he turned into the driveway Mrs. Deane came down the drive towards him.

He took off his hat. " Good afternoon, Mrs. Deane. I was passing, so I thought I'd like to pay you a visit."

She said coldly : " Mr. O'Day, the last time I saw you I told you that I did not want to see you or speak to you again."

" Quite," said O'Day cheerfully. " But I didn't say

that, and I want to talk to you. You know, you ought to be very pleased with me."

She raised her pencilled eyebrows. O'Day noted with approval her well-cut Harris tweed coat, the nigger brown pull-on felt hat, the well-fitting chamois gloves.

She said : " Why should I be glad to see you ? "

O'Day put his hand in his pocket ; produced the two emerald and diamond clips.

He said with a smile : " It seems to be my main function in life, to return your jewellery, but I think these are the only other missing pieces, aren't they ? Maybe Pavin hasn't had time to get any more jewellery from you, or did he ask for money last time ? "

There was silence for a moment. She stood looking at the clips in his hand. He picked up her gloved right hand ; put the clips in the palm ; closed her fingers over them.

He said : " Now, let's go and talk, shall we ? "

She said in a low voice : " Very well. . . ." She turned ; led the way up the drive towards the house.

Inside, in the drawing-room, O'Day said : " Sit down in that armchair and listen to me, Mrs. Deane. You might easily be in a spot. I'm trying to keep you out of it. Also I'm still trying to earn that seven hundred and fifty pounds. Actually"—he grinned at her cheerfully—" I could call it a day. I think the value of the jewellery I've returned to you is very much more than seven hundred and fifty pounds. But that isn't the point."

She asked : " What is the point, Mr. O'Day ? "

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"The point is you're engaged to a murderer."

She sat back in the chair. "What do you mean by that?" she asked.

O'Day said: "You remember when I saw you last I was talking about the murder of Ralph Vanner at the Palissade Club at Maidenhead last Thursday night?"

She nodded. She said slowly: "Yes, I remember."

"Pavin killed him," said O'Day.

She drew in her breath sharply. "Is it possible that this can be true?"

O'Day nodded. "It's not only possible, Mrs. Deane; it's a fact. This man Pavin is bad medicine. Didn't you know that?"

She said nothing. She sat, her gloved hands folded in her lap, looking straight in front of her.

"I know plenty about Pavin," O'Day went on, "and quite a lot about you. I know just how Pavin has got himself into the position of being engaged to you. You don't love him, in spite of the fact that he's a good-looking and attractive man, but you were prepared to marry him out of a sense of duty—a sense of duty to your daughter. Pavin came over to England and told you it was in his power to get your daughter released from the mental home where she's a prisoner in France. He probably said it would take a little time and some money. After he'd done a certain amount of talking on these lines, and after he got to know you better, he pretended to be in love with you. He suggested that if he succeeded in getting your daughter out of the asylum the least you could do would be to marry him. You agreed. You agreed because you'd have promised to do anything on earth to get your girl out of that place. Am I right?"

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She answered in a dull voice : " Yes, I suppose you are."

O'Day went on : " Maybe you'd be surprised if I told you that Pavin is an adventurer and a black-mailer ; that he was employed by your ex-husband—d'Escarte—to *put you in a position where you'd have to marry him*. Because d'Escarte hates you he's put your daughter in that home. He knows you'd do anything to get her out ; that you'd even marry Pavin. Pavin, I take it, has represented himself to you as a man of property, hasn't he ? "

She nodded.

" Well, he's not," said O'Day. " d'Escarte was going to pay Pavin when you were married to him, because on the day you marry Pavin you lose your allowance under the settlement made in the French Courts when you divorced d'Escarte. Now do you understand ? "

She said in a low voice : " My God. . .!"

O'Day went on : " Nicholas Needham wasn't merely jealous, as you thought. Needham's no push-over. He went over to France and he found out all about Pavin, and somehow or other he found out about the plot between your ex-husband and Pavin. When Needham came back to this country he'd made up his mind to go to a private detective. My name was suggested to him and he remembered it. But I was away and he couldn't see me at the time. He wrote the long letter which he left in my office giving me all the facts. That letter wasn't destroyed. Somebody read it. That somebody was my partner—Ralph Vanner—and he was murdered because he *had* read it."

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O'Day stood at the end of the room, watching her. She was clasping and unclasping her hands nervously. He could see that she was unable to speak.

He continued : " I want to keep you out of this. I want to keep you out of it because that is one of the things I was paid to do, and also because I've an idea that concerns you and which might be interesting when I've had time to work it out. In other words, Mrs. Deane, I'm afraid you'll have to trust me whether you like it or not. If you don't you'll probably find yourself mixed up in a very nasty murder case."

She said in the same low voice : " I don't mind trusting you, Mr. O'Day. I never have really distrusted you. But what about the jewellery ? I don't understand about that."

" That's simple," said O'Day. " Somebody found out what Pavin was at and decided to put the screws on him. In other words here was a blackmailer being blackmailed. Pavin, I believe, told you that he had no funds in this country ; that it was essential for his scheme for getting your daughter out of the asylum that he had money here. So you gave him the jewellery. Isn't that right ? "

She nodded. " I'm beginning to think you're a very good detective, Mr. O'Day."

He smiled. " I'm beginning to think so too. I think this business is going to be over pretty soon. In the meantime I'd be glad if you'd stay around here. Don't go out too much. There's a very astute police officer in charge of this case. He doesn't waste any time. I should think he might be nosing about Sussex quite soon. Given a day or so I think I can straighten

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this thing out. If I can I'll come back and see you. I'll tell you all about it."

She got up. "What do you mean . . . if you *can* . . . ?"

O'Day picked up his hat. "Well . . . if I'm unlucky I might not be able to. So long, Mrs. Deane. I'll be seeing you—I hope."

He went out.

At half-past four O'Day stopped his car outside the Hotel Splendide at Eastbourne. Parker, the hall-porter, met him in the foyer.

He said : "Good afternoon, Mr. O'Day. I'm glad to see you again. Are you staying with us ?"

O'Day shook his head. "I believe there's a Mr. Pavin staying in the hotel. Would you like to go up to his room—don't send a page—and say that a Mr. Williams wants to see him ?"

Parker looked a trifle surprised. "Are *you* Mr. Williams, sir ?"

O'Day grinned. "For the purpose of this visit, yes. . . ."

Parker said : "Well, then I've got a note for you. Mr. Pavin gave it to me before he left. He went this morning. He's gone back to London." He went into his office ; came out with a note ; handed it to O'Day.

O'Day split open the envelope. The note inside said :

"Dear Mr. Williams,

"I had a telephone call from Mrs. Williams saying

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that you'd be coming down to see me, and I'm sorry that when you arrive I shan't be here. However, I shall be at your disposal any time after ten o'clock this evening.

"I've taken a house. It's three quarters of the way between Eastbourne and Pevensey—not far from the Crumbles. It's the only red house on the foreshore. It stands by itself. You will find it quite easily. I look forward to seeing you some time after ten tonight.

"Sincerely,

"G. P."

O'Day grinned to himself. He put the note in his pocket. He went over to the reception office ; engaged a room for the night. He went upstairs ; ordered some tea. He took off his coat ; lay down on the bed ; put his hands behind his head ; went to sleep.

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At ten-fifteen O'Day stopped the car on the narrow, winding road that cuts across the Crumbles and leads towards Pevensey. It was a cold night, with a good moon. Away to the right, standing on the foreshore, he could see the small red brick house—a solitary building. O'Day opened the cubby-hole in the dashboard ; produced a half bottle of whisky. He unscrewed the stopper ; took a swig ; replaced the bottle. He got out ; locked the car ; began to walk slowly towards the house.

As he walked across the shingle between the road and the house, O'Day thought that the week had been interesting. He thought a lot could happen in nine days. As he approached he saw the house was in

darkness on the side facing him. The place was lonely and it might have been uninhabited. He rang the bell, stood, leaning against the doorpost; lighting a cigarette.

The door opened. There was a single dim light in the hall which threw into prominence the tall, well-built figure of the good-looking man who confronted him.

O'Day said: "My name's Williams. You're George Pavin, aren't you?"

Pavin smiled. "Yes. You've come because you want something? Mrs. Williams telephoned me."

O'Day grinned. "I want a lot," he said. "My name's O'Day. I'm a private detective. Mrs. Williams wasn't Mrs. Williams, which you well know. You're not trying to tell me that Merys Vanner hasn't been on the telephone to you since she came back from the Garter Inn at Goring, are you?"

Pavin said, the same charming smile still about his well-shaped mouth: "I think you're rather interesting, Mr. O'Day."

"You'll find I'm a damned sight more interesting before I'm through. Shall we talk about this?"

Pavin stood to one side. "Of course. . . . Come in."

O'Day went into the hallway; waited for Pavin to close the door. Then he followed him along a passage-way. The room at the end was cheerful and a small fire was burning. The curtains were drawn, the room comfortably furnished.

Pavin indicated a chair. "Won't you sit down, Mr. O'Day? And tell me what's brought you here?"

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O'Day said almost casually : " I thought you might like to do a deal."

Pavin raised his eyebrows. " A 'deal? I wonder exactly what you mean by that? "

O'Day said : " I'll make myself plain. Last Thursday night you went to see Ralph Vanner at the Palissade Club. You killed him. Well . . . believe it or not . . ." O'Day went on with a wry smile, " I'm *not* very interested in that. I'm not a policeman. I'm a private detective. I'm working for a client. My job is to do to the best of my ability what he wanted me to do, and what he wanted me to do was to stop you marrying Mrs. Deane. See . . .? "

Pavin nodded. He was entirely unperturbed. He produced a cigarette case from the breast pocket of his coat ; selected a cigarette. O'Day noted, with a certain admiration, that his fingers were quite steady.

O'Day continued : " There's only one person in this country who can prove that you killed Vanner. Realise, as far as the police are concerned, you've never even come into this case. As you know, I was the first suspect, but luck's been on my side. Now they've got another suspect. That's Merys Vanner. But she's all right too because she has a cast-iron alibi. The police know that on the night of the murder she never left her apartment in St. John's Wood. So now who are they going to look for? There's nobody they can look for."

Pavin said : " But Mr. O'Day could tell them where to look . . .? "

O'Day nodded. " Precisely ! "

Pavin leaned back in his chair. He said : " I think

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you're a *very* interesting person. You seem to know such an awful lot. Or are you merely bluffing?"

O'Day smiled. "I've had a certain number of facts at my disposal, and I'm not a bad guesser. I'm going to tell you roughly what's happened during the last week or so. Colonel Nicholas Needham left a letter for me. That letter contained the full story of the scheme between d'Escarte and you to gyp Mrs. Deane out of her allowance after she was married to you. That letter was left at my office last Saturday week. It was in a sealed envelope and there was some money with it. My secretary left it on her desk while she went out to have coffee and to buy something. Merys Vanner was on the other side of the road in a car or a doorway, watching the office. She knew Needham had been there because she'd seen him.

"She knew Needham had left a letter because she'd suggested that was the thing for him to do if I wasn't there. She'd seen him leave. She knew the letter was there. But she was rather worried because my secretary had left the office before closing time. Merys didn't know when she might come back so she couldn't go in at that moment to get the letter."

O'Day grinned. "Then you and she had a bit of hard luck. *Ralph Vanner arrived and went into the office.* He was looking for me. He wanted to see me badly because he was wise to his wife and he knew something pretty lousy was on between you and her. He saw the large envelope addressed to me on my secretary's desk. He thought he'd better open it because it might be important business and he wanted to make a come-back with me. He knew that his wife had lied to him and he knew something else. He knew that

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she'd been down here at Eastbourne meeting you because, when he discovered that she had lied to him about me, he put a private detective named Bale on her tail.

"Anyhow, Ralph Vanner read that letter. He knew that nobody except Miss Trundle would be in the office till Monday morning and he also believed he might find me at my apartment. Unluckily, I was away, but he read the letter and it told him all he wanted to know. He put the letter and the money in another envelope ; sealed it ; left it on Miss Trundle's desk. Then he went.

"Merys Vanner watched until Miss Trundle came back and left the office again after one o'clock. Then she went over. She let herself into the office with a key she'd got from her husband at some time or other. She broke open the drawer of my desk where my secretary had locked away the letter. She looked at the handwriting on the envelope and she recognised it as her husband's. She knew Ralph Vanner had opened that envelope and read the contents, put the letter in a fresh envelope and addressed it to me. *And she knew what was in that letter.*

"That was why Ralph Vanner had to die. She took the money and the letter, and she typed a note to me purporting to come from her husband saying he'd taken it. Then she went away. Unfortunately she didn't destroy the letter."

Pavin said in a smooth voice : "That was very silly of her, wasn't it, Mr. O'Day ? It's amazing the things that women will do."

O'Day shook his head. "I don't think it was silly of her, Pavin. Do you know why ? "

Pavin sat back. He was quite at ease. "You, who seem to know everything—you tell me why, Mr. O'Day."

O'Day said : "When Merys Vanner stayed at the Sable Inn with Nicholas Needham four or five weeks ago, he told her the whole story. He told her the story of what he knew about you and how distressed he was at the idea of Mrs. Deane marrying you. Well, Merys wasn't foolish enough to let a chance like that go by. She came down to Sussex to find you. She intended to blackmail you. She probably did for a week or so, but then—and I can understand this, knowing Merys—she fell for you. You're the sort of man she would fall for. She'd left her husband. I'd given her the air. You were to be number three. So you two made friends. A fine pair of friends ! She knew all about the d'Escarte plot about Lauretta Deane. She was going to share in the proceeds, because the pair of you probably arranged that after you'd married Mrs. Deane you'd take a run-out on her and leave her broke and friendless.

"But Merys didn't trust you, so she kept Needham's letter so that she'd have something tangible to hold you up with, if you tried any funny business with her. Quite a girl, Merys—isn't she ?" ..

Pavin said casually : "Maybe you're right. Women do the damndest things."

"Yes," said O'Day. "Women like Merys Vanner do."

Pavin got up. He began to stroll casually about the room, drawing easily on his cigarette. He said : "I take it that the purpose of this visit is to tell me that you have the letter, Mr. O'Day ? And on the

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strength of having it you propose to make a deal with me ? ”

O'Day nodded. “ That letter, from your point of view, Pavin, is dynamite, and you know it. *That letter links you up with the murder.* The police know that a letter was left for me in my office ; that it's connected in some way with Ralph Vanner's death. They want it. If they had it, they'd get to work on Merys Vanner. She'd have to talk and it'd be all over with you. You'd hang by the neck until you were dead. But, as I have told you before, I'm not interested in Vanner's death. I'm working for my client. You write another letter ; hand it to me and I'll give you the one I've got. That's a fair deal, isn't it ? ”

“ Meaning what ? ” asked Pavin. He looked more interested.

O'Day said : “ It's quite obvious that the man d'Escarte is plotting against Mrs. Deane. He's tried it once with you. He may try it again. All I want is ammunition to deal with d'Escarte. I want a letter from you giving all the details as to how he got his daughter in the asylum ; how he bought the medical evidence that put her there. In other words, I want something that will enable me to get that girl out ; that will cancel any certificate of insanity ; that will send her back to her mother, where she belongs. I want the story of exactly what occurred between you and d'Escarte, and I'll tell you what I want it for.

“ I'm going to see d'Escarte, and I'm going to arrange that there are no more attempts on his part against Mrs. Deane or her income. If I have that letter I can force d'Escarte to surrender a capital sum

to Mrs. Deane that will keep her secure for the rest of her life, and also her daughter, against whom he will never be able to make any other attempt. You understand ? ”

Pavin nodded.

“ Work it out for yourself,” said O’Day. “ At the moment you’re not connected with this murder. The letter you’re going to write might make you liable to proceedings in France but certainly not in this country. If d’Escarte behaves himself—and he will because he’ll be scared sick—it may never be necessary for me to show that letter to anybody except him.”

Pavin stopped walking. He said : “ Well, I’m in a spot, so I’ll get out of it. I’ll write your letter for you. When do I get the other one ? ”

“ When do you think ? ” said O’Day. “ You didn’t expect me to bring that letter with me here in my pocket, did you ? I’m not such a fool. We’ll talk about where it is when you’ve written the letter I want.”

“ All right,” said Pavin. “ I don’t distrust you, O’Day. I don’t distrust you because, if we do this deal—and I don’t see why we shouldn’t—you’re making yourself an accessory after a murder. *You* won’t be able to talk about *me*—in this country anyway. You’d be putting yourself in a spot.”

O’Day said : “ I understand that perfectly well. I told you I wasn’t interested in the murder. I’m interested in doing the job for my client.”

“ So be it,” said Pavin. “ If you’ll excuse me I’ll sit down and write this interesting document. You’ll find whisky and soda in the sideboard.”

O’Day said : “ Good. . . . And see it is interesting.

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I want the names of the doctors who certified this girl—every bit of information of the plot between you and d'Escarte ; what he paid you or what he'd arranged to pay you if this marriage had taken place. And make it snappy."

Pavin said almost querulously : " You're in a fearful hurry, aren't you ? " He crossed the room ; sat at the writing desk. He took some notepaper out of the drawer ; his fountain pen from his pocket. He began to write.

Half an hour later he got up from the desk. He said : " Would you like me to read it ? "

" No thanks. I'll read it myself." O'Day took the letter ; read it through carefully. He folded it up ; put it in the breast pocket of his jacket. He said : " That's all I want. Needham's letter is in my document case in my room at the Hotel Splendide at Eastbourne. If you come with me I'll hand it over. Shall we get moving ? "

Pavin said : " No. . . . "

" Why not ? " asked O'Day.

Pavin grinned. " Here's an excellent reason." He took his hand out of his jacket pocket. O'Day saw the automatic pistol with the silencer over the barrel.

Pavin said : " You're not so clever as you thought, Mr. O'Day. There's a very good proverb in the English language : ' In for a penny in for a pound.' Well, I was in for a penny over killing Ralph Vanner, so I may as well be in for a pound and kill you. After which I can remove from your pocket the letter which I have just written ; take myself over to the Splendide and on some pretext or other get up to your room and

get the letter that *I* want from your document case. Anyway, I'm going to take a chance on that."

O'Day said coolly: "That sounds pretty good to me from your point of view, but you'll have to get rid of me somehow, won't you? You can't leave bodies lying about in houses in England, you know."

"Can't you?" said Pavin. "I believe it has been done. But I don't propose to do it. There's quite a comfortable grave for you under the floor of the garage outside. I've been working on it all afternoon. And no one will come to this house for weeks. I took it from the owners some days ago—over the telephone—with the rent paid in advance in cash by registered post—under an assumed name. I shall have ample time to make a very comfortable getaway. The car you've left outside will be found abandoned in London in a side street. Then, as you've so rightly pointed out, there will be nothing to connect me with Vanner's death. In two days I shall be back in France. And now I think the time has come to terminate this little interview."

He pulled back the ejector sleeve of the automatic pistol. O'Day heard the click as the cartridge went from the clip into the barrel. He thought: It was tough to take a chance like this, especially now it hasn't come off. He sat rigidly in the chair; waited for the bullet. He was watching Pavin so closely that he didn't hear the door open.

But he heard the gloomy and lugubrious voice of Chief Detective-Inspector Dougal, who said quietly:

"Put it down, Pavin. You've caused enough trouble."

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O'Day got up. He turned and saw Dougal and the other two men in the doorway.

Pavin laughed. He said almost with indifference : " Well . . . gentlemen . . . this is a case of hail and farewell." He put the barrel of the pistol in his mouth; pulled the trigger.

Dougal regarded his glass of whisky and soda. He said : " You took a hell of a chance, O'Day. If that girl Mabel Bonaventura hadn't got the wind up and come down to the Yard and told me that you were going to Eastbourne this afternoon you'd probably be dead. I knew you'd got that letter from Merys Vanner. I *thought* you wanted it to make a deal with someone. I thought that someone would be Vanner's murderer. Really, I suppose, I ought to charge you with withholding information from the police."

He drank the whisky and soda : Then : " I suppose you didn't *tell* the girl Bonaventura to come and talk to me . . . did you ? " "

O'Day grinned. " I'm afraid I did. I knew what Pavin would do when I arrived. I knew you'd put a tail on me. I knew you'd be around. I wanted you to hear what he had to say. I'm very glad you were here."

Dougal picked up his hat and carefully rolled umbrella. " I knew I was being made use of," he said solemnly. " Well . . . good night, O'Day. You'd better come and see me at the Yard tomorrow. We'll clean up all the details."

O'Day said : " What about Merys Vanner ? "

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Dougal shrugged his shoulders. "She ought to hang. But juries don't like hanging women—not unless they *have* to." But if she says that she didn't know what Pavin intended to do ; that she didn't know he was going to the Palissade Club last Thursday . . . well, maybe she'll get away with it. Personally, I hope she doesn't."

He went out of the bar.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINALE

O'DAY STOPPED the car by the gate leading to the Dower House. He got out ; lighted a cigarette. He stood on the grass verge by the side of the road, admiring the June sunshine.

Down the road another car was parked. He wondered to whom it belonged.

He threw his half-smoked cigarette away ; walked to the gate. As he turned into the drive a man came towards him from the house.

It was Needham.

O'Day said : " Well . . . I'll be damned . . . ! "

" I don't think so," said Needham. " Not from what I hear inside." He jerked his head towards the house. " So you've pulled it off. Mrs. Deane told me what you told her on the telephone from Paris."

O'Day said : " Everything is all right. It's taken two months, but it's been well worth it. There are a few formalities to be gone through. But the girl will be over here this week, and Mrs. Deane's original settlement has been cancelled and d'Escarte has settled a capital sum on her that will keep her in comfort for the rest of her life."

" Nice work," said Needham. " I guess you earned that dough I left for you, O'Day. I'm pretty glad for all of you. Maybe you want some more money ? If you do, it's yours. You've earned it."

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O'Day shook his head. "I'm satisfied," he said.

"You goddam well ought to be," said Needham. He was grinning. "You know," he went on, "when I asked Lauretta to marry me an' she turned me down, she said she never wanted to marry anybody again. Not after d'Escarte. Then Pavin came along and she felt she *had* to marry him. That wasn't so good. But now she's talking about marriage. She has a different idea about it." He sighed. "She ought to be married. That baby's too good to be alone. That's why I reckon you ought to have paid *me* for doing this job!"

O'Day asked: "What the hell do you mean by that one?"

Needham looked at him. He was still grinning. "I thought you were a hell of a clever guy. Don't tell me you're just another dumb cluck. Don't you know she's nuts about you?"

He put out his hand. "So long, fella," he said. He began to walk towards the gateway.

O'Day stood in the centre of the drive. He stood there for quite a minute. He said to himself: "Well . . . I'll be . . ."

He straightened his tie; pushed his soft hat a little over one eye. He began to whistle quietly.

He walked quickly towards the house.

THE END

